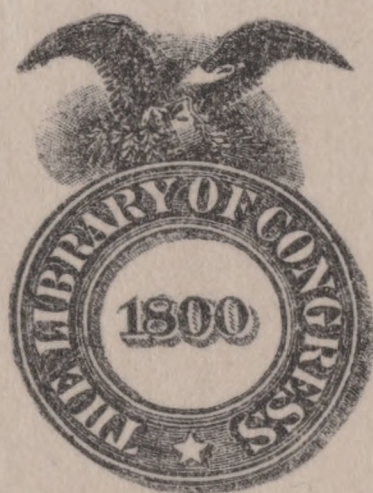


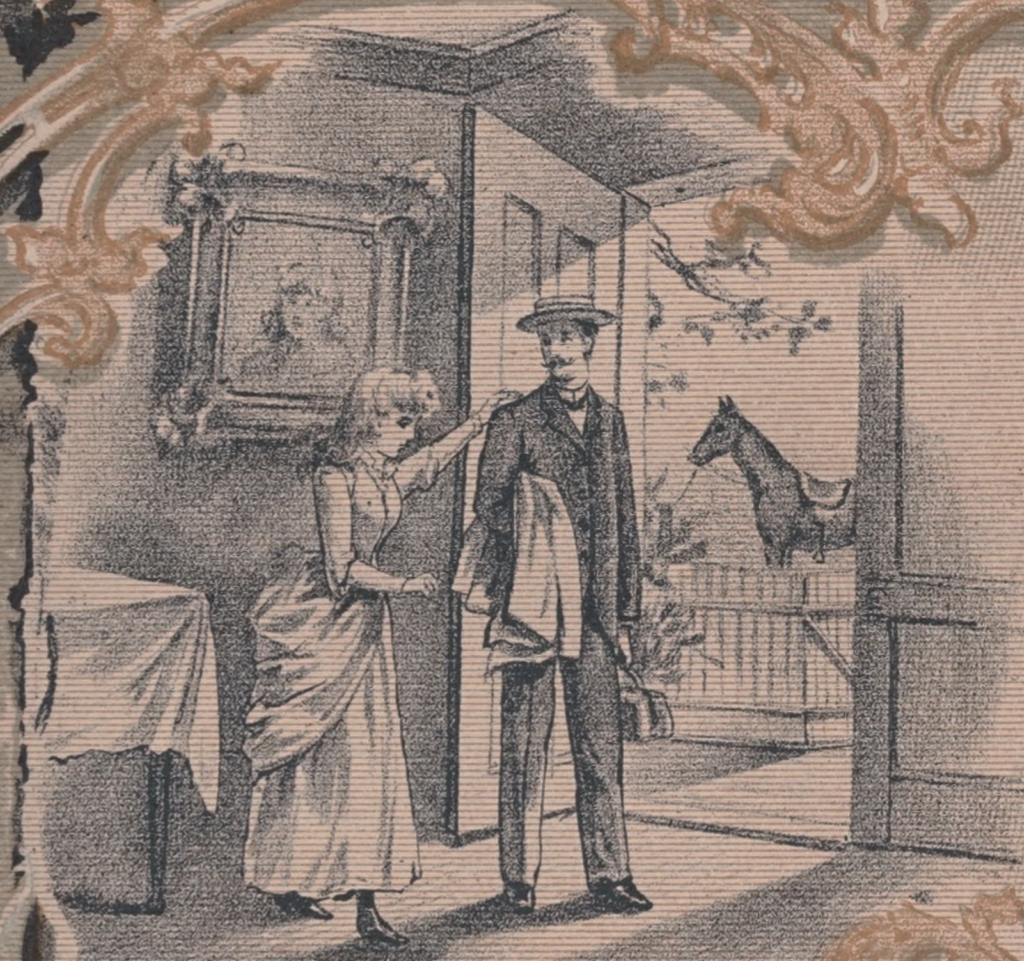


Class PZ 3
Book L614 Be

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT

2.6.
PRICE 25 CENTS.

THE BEAUTIFUL COQUETTE



BY
LAURA JEAN LIBBEY.

NEW YORK.
MUNRO'S PUBLISHING HOUSE,
24 & 26 VANDEWATER ST.

The Beautiful Coquette;

OR,

THE LOVE THAT WON HER.

The Most Intense Love Story Ever Written.

By LAURA JEAN LIBBEY,

*Author of "The Crime of Hallow-E'en," "The Flirtations of a Beauty,"
"Daisy Gordon's Folly," "Little Leafy," "Lyn-
dall's Temptation," etc.*

NEW YORK:

NORMAN L. MUNRO, PUBLISHER,

24 AND 26 VANDEWATER STREET.

1892.

35

51514X

DEC 30 1892

CITY OF WASHINGTON

PZ³
L614Be

*Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1892, by Norman L.
Munro, in the office of the Librarian of Congress,
at Washington, D. C.*

The Beautiful Coquette;

OR,

THE LOVE THAT WON HER.

The Most Intense Love Story Ever Written.

By LAURA JEAN LIBBEY,

*Author of "The Crime of Hallow-E'en," "The Flirtations of a Beauty,"
"Daisy Gordon's Folly," "Little Leafy," "Lyn-
dall's Temptation," etc.*

CHAPTER I.

THE LOVERS.

"She looked so lovely as she bent
And kissed her dainty finger-tips;
A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly worth for this—
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
Upon her perfect lips."

"I WONDER if it is true that coming events cast their dark shadows on before? To-day of all days I should be happy, for Aurelia is coming home; and yet—— Somehow there is a heavy oppression at my heart, a sense of coming evil that I cannot shake off.

"But, pshaw! I know it is wrong to allow my mind to run upon presentiments—they never come true;" and Margaret Lancaster, a pale, slight young girl, turned slowly from the cottage window where she had been standing—gazing dreamily out over the wheat fields, waving golden under the rays of the June sunshine—crossed the room, and paused, with clasped hands, before two portraits hanging side by side on the opposite wall.

They were the portraits of two young and lovely girls

—twin sisters—but as widely different in features as two mortals well could be.

The names carved on the gilded frames, read “Margaret,” and “Aurelia.”

In the portrait of Margaret, there was no mistaking the girl who stood before it, with her pale, sweet face, innocent blue eyes, and fair curling hair.

It was just such a face, with a pure white soul shining through it, that the old masters gave to the faces of angels.

But Aurelia! How can I describe to you what Aurelia was like? The artist who painted the portrait went mad for love of her.

Aurelia had a dark, dimpled face, with the deep crimson of a wild rose’s heart on cheek and smiling, pouting lips; dark, curling hair, and wine-dark eyes, passionate and wholly irresistible.

They were danger signals that might have warned men, but somehow they always courted the danger of looking into them.

A face like Aurelia’s was never painted upon the pictured faces of angels; rather of the beauties of the gilded *salons* of Paris.

They were only seventeen, these twin sisters—Margaret and Aurelia Lancaster—whose past was so bitter, and whose future was to be the strangest that ever pen portrayed.

Alas, how cruel it was that the love of one man was destined to wreck the life of both!

How long Margaret stood there in silent contemplation of the portrait, she never knew. She was startled by a step and a cheery voice outside that brought the color to her face in a great surging glow.

The door was swung hastily open, and a tall, stalwart young man, with a fair, handsome face, came hurriedly into the room.

“Ah, here you are, Margaret,” he said, cheerily, advancing and taking one of her little hands in his. “I have been looking everywhere for you. I might have known that I should find you here before Aurelia’s portrait. Why, this is perfect idolatry, I should say, Margaret. I do not quite like it.”

The girl laughed a low, happy, sweet laugh.

"You must idolize Aurelia, too, for my sake, Gerald," she said, softly. "She is so bright—so beautiful."

Gerald Romaine bent his fair, handsome head and kissed the lily-white hands he held.

"Very generous of my-wife-that-is-to-be, making arrangements for a place in my heart for another," he said, amusedly.

"But it is only for Aurelia," she answered, opening her blue eyes wide, "and for nobody else."

"Aurelia will, indeed, be very dear to me for *your* sake, Margaret," he responded; "but forgive me for changing the subject; I must tell you, hurriedly, that which I have sought you to say. And that is, that I cannot go over to the train; I have just received a telegram from New York which requires my presence there for the next two days. I start immediately. Father will be at the station to meet Aurelia. I am sorry, indeed, not to be here to welcome her, but it cannot be helped, dear. I have barely time to snatch one good-bye kiss. I must be off, Margaret."

A moment later her fair, handsome lover was waving her adieu as he galloped past the window, and was quickly lost to sight in a bend of the road.

Margaret turned away from the window with a beating heart.

"How good Heaven is to give me his love," she murmured, softly; "it was the one gift of God that I craved and prayed for above all others. I wonder, despite the fact that the wedding-day is already set, if I really am to be his wife? It seems too great a joy to be real."

"Margaret—Margaret, child! where are you?" called another voice. This time it was Mrs. Romaine summoning her, from the old farmhouse kitchen, where all manner of good things known to culinary art were in a state of preparation in honor of Aurelia's coming.

"I do hope Aurelia will be glad to get home, but I almost doubt it," said Mrs. Romaine, seating herself on the cool, wide doorstep, and fanning herself vigorously with her gingham apron.

"What a deal of difference there is between you two sisters, anyhow," she went on, energetically; you are as

sensible as an old woman, Margaret, and Aurelia is that feather-brained ——”

A little white hand came down suddenly over her lips.

“Don’t speak in that way of Aurelia,” said Margaret, in a pained voice; “indeed, you hurt me, dear Mrs. Romaine. She is willful, roguish, gay, but she has a true heart—dear little Aurelia.”

Mrs. Romaine shrugged her shoulders, but answered never a word. Margaret would not have been pleased had she known what her thoughts were.

The story of the presence of these two young girls in the Romaine household was certainly a sad one—a few words will explain how it came about.

Sixteen years before, the Romaines had kept the village inn down at the fork of the roads, and the hospitable, cheery place was known far and wide from the travelers who had chanced to pass that way.

One dark, stormy night—ah! how well Mrs. Romaine remembered it—the driver of the stage, who always stopped there to change horses, deposited a traveler at the inn—a young and lovely woman—traveling alone, save for the two wee mites she carried in her arms. Despite the storm, Mrs. Romaine hurried out to meet her, and relieve the pale, slight creature of her burden.

“Come right into the sitting-room, ma’am,” she cried, cheerily. “Lord bless me! it’s an awful night to be traveling, and alone; are you going far?”

“I was to have gone to New York—but I—I took the wrong train,” said the stranger with a sob in her voice. “I—I—was not used to traveling, you see,” she went on piteously. “The hurrying crowds, the clanging bells, and deafening sounds confused me. I found out my mistake when the conductor came around to take up the tickets—they told me it would be best to stop off at the next station—stop over night at this inn, and take the early morning train down at the cross-roads for New York—and I followed their advice!”

“It was certainly the best you could have done,” assented Mrs. Romaine, proceeding to unwrap the folds of the heavy shawls that enveloped the babies. She gave a cry of delight as she saw them; never, in the whole course of her life, had she beheld anything so beautiful

as the two infantile faces turned simultaneously and wonderingly toward her—one dark—the other fair.

“What beautiful darlings!” she cried, with all a woman’s rapture; “are they twins?”

A quick, sharp cry broke from the lips of the woman cowering over the blazing fire.

Mrs. Romaine asked the question a second time before she answered “yes.”

“Of course you want a nice room with a comfortable fire in it and a hot supper,” said Mrs. Romaine briskly. “I’ll see that you have it at once, and I’ll come and help you with the little ones.”

“You are very kind,” said the lady, laying a detaining hand on Mrs. Romaine’s arm—“but I shall not require any supper—food would choke me—I want only—rest—rest——” and the words ended in a heavy sob.

“But the children would like something to eat, wouldn’t you, dears?” asked Mrs. Romaine, stooping and kissing their velvety lips.

A little later Mrs. Romaine announced that the room was ready, and soon after the trio were ensconced in it.

“I wish you would let me bring you a glass of wine at least,” she said, turning toward the door—“you look so very pale, ma’am—like you might faint——”

“I *do* feel weak,” assented the stranger—“yes, you may bring me the wine if you like, I——”

The sentence never was finished; there was a low, stifled cry, and the beautiful lady who had been standing with hands outstretched before the fire, staggered suddenly backward and sunk down apparently lifeless at Mrs. Romaine’s feet.

In a trice Mrs. Romaine had raised her in her arms.

“My God!” she cried out in horror as her eyes fell on the ghastly face and staring eyes, “she is dead!”

But no—the heart beat faintly. The thread of life in that fair body was loath to snap in twain so easily—but there was a grayish pallor on the cheek and lips that struck terror to Mrs. Romaine’s heart.

Restoratives were quickly applied, and strong brandy forced between the white lips, but it was all useless.

“Mercy on us!” cried Mrs. Romaine in great alarm

to the housemaid whom she had summoned, "*the lady is dying!*"

CHAPTER II.

IN A THOUGHTLESS MOMENT THE VOW WAS WRUNG FROM HER LIPS.

BUT even as Mrs. Romaine spoke, the lady's eyes opened slowly, and she cast a strange, yearning look into the kind, homely, pitying face bending over her.

"Am I dying?" she gasped; "tell me the truth, am I really dying? Answer me—do not mislead me."

"I am afraid so, my poor soul," replied Mrs. Romaine, huskily. "I have sent for a doctor, but the nearest one lives many a mile away."

"That was—useless," murmured the stranger; "my time has come, I feel it in my heart; oh, the poor babies—the poor little ones."

A terrible convulsion shook her frame as she spoke, which was rapidly followed by a second and a third, and looking at the white, stark face, Mrs. Romaine saw that the shadow of death was indeed creeping over it.

Oh, if the flickering flame of life might but last until the doctor arrived. But it was not to be. The stranger grew worse so rapidly that Mrs. Romaine's alarm increased with each passing moment.

"My life is ebbing out!" she gasped, speaking with difficulty; "but, oh, I cannot die with the dark, horrible story I have to tell—untold. For the love of Heaven, send for a minister; I should not rest in my grave, though they buried me fathoms deep, with this on my soul."

"Oh, lady," sobbed Mrs. Romaine, pityingly, "there isn't a minister this side of Stillwell, and that's twenty odd miles from here. Is it anything you could tell *me*, poor soul?"

The strangely luminous eyes turned upon her, and their steady gaze seemed to burn down into the very depths of her soul—she felt almost afraid of being all alone with the dying stranger.

"Oh, God, if I could but trust you," the pale lips murmured.

"You can trust me," replied Mrs. Romaine with simple dignity.

"Take a solemn vow that you will never betray that which I have to say to you—swear it, make your oath so binding that nothing on this earth could tempt you to break it!

"No word that you may confide in me shall ever pass my lips in life or even on the threshold of death—say that—swear it!"

Mrs. Romaine repeated the awesome words slowly after her, and in the dark time to come she would have given her life if that solemn oath had not been wrung from her lips.

"Lock the door and come closer," she whispered faintly, "but first put the two little babes in my arms."

Mrs. Romaine did as requested, but to her amazement she noticed that all the mother-love of the dying woman seemed to be showered upon the dark-eyed infant. She was apparently utterly oblivious to the presence of the other child.

"Oh, I am so young to die and leave her all alone," she wailed.

"Please Heaven, she will still have her little sister," said Mrs. Romaine gently, but the woman did not hear.

"Listen," she cried, "the curse that falls on the daughters of the house of Lancaster hangs over her head. That is the reason, perhaps, that I have loved Aurelia best," she admitted piteously. "*She*" (pointing to fair-haired Margaret), "will never know great sorrow, she will pass through life calmly. The sword will fall on Aurelia's head—only on Aurelia's."

"It may be kept from her for long years, but it will overtake her at last, in all the freshness of her girlish beauty, the horrible story will burst upon the world like a skeleton stalking forth from its charnel house, and then—— Oh, God! help my beautiful little Aurelia. I dare not think what will happen then," and the hapless young mother kissed the tiny rose-bud face, all the passion and anguish of love shining in her dying eyes.

"Listen!" she cried again, turning to Mrs. Romaine. "Let me tell you, while I have the strength, the most pitiful story that ever darkened a human life, and made me wonder if there is peace and safety to be found on

the wide earth, and justice in heaven. You will realize, when I have confessed all, that I am right in praying God in this, my dying hour, that Aurelia may never love; for she, the last dark-eyed daughter of the accursed race of the Lancasters, *must never marry*. Bend closer, while I tell you why. Oh, Aurelia, Aurelia, why must the sin of another fall on your innocent head, and blot out love, happiness and faith? I——”

The sentence was never finished. A violent spasm shook her slender frame, and her face grew rigid. How she tried to beat back the wave of death for one brief moment! How her fluttering soul clung to its tenement of clay, to do the bidding of her will, one terrible instant! But, alas! the words froze on her stiffening lips in a bitter wail. The vital secret, which was to bring a world of woe to so many lives, was destined to remain unrevealed until the fatal time she had foretold. She had fallen back upon her pillow—dead.

That was an experience in Rachel Romaine's life that always stood out clear. She never forgot how they searched for some clew to trace where Mrs. Lancaster's home was—where her friends could be found; but there was not so much as a line about her to aid them in the search. So they buried her in the little churchyard hard by, and turned their attention to the two stray waifs who had been thrust so unceremoniously upon their hands.

The neighbors advised that they be sent to the home for foundlings, but this neither John Romaine nor his good wife would agree to do.

“We have enough and to spare, Rachel,” said John; “we will keep the twin babies, and do for them as though they were our own. That will not cause us to love our own son Gerald any the less—bless the boy's heart!”

Thus it came to pass that the little ones, Margaret and Aurelia, became the *protegees* of John and Rachel Romaine; and fine sport they were for Master Gerald, their ten-year-old son, who was never tired of looking at the pretty white fairies, as he called them.

Swiftly—very swiftly it seemed to Mrs. Romaine—the years rolled on, and brought with them many changes.

The Romaines no longer kept the village inn. For

years they had been domiciled at Romaine Farm, some distance down the valley; and here it was, in this isolated spot, that the two waifs their humble roof sheltered blossomed into lovely girlhood.

But one event happened in those early years to cast a slight gloom over the household, and that was the departure of Gerald Romaine for college.

That was the last that Aurelia saw of him for long years.

The time came at length when it was decided that the girls must have a better education than the village school had by afforded them, for they were fourteen now. Then it was that the wide difference between the natures of sweet Margaret and willful, impetuous Aurelia became apparent.

When Farmer Romaine announced to them that he had made arrangements to send them to a boarding-school in Richmond, Margaret sobbed as though her heart would break at the very thought of leaving the dear old farm and those who had been so dear to her; but Aurelia's joy was intense; she could not ask questions enough as to how soon they were to start, and when the day came it was the happiest of her life.

The first three weeks that Margaret and Aurelia spent at Miss Hulburton's "fashionable seminary for young ladies," neither of the girls ever forgot. Margaret was timid and very shy of strangers, cried herself sick with longing for the sight of the dear old farm again, with the scent of the pink clover and the honeysuckle about it, and the dear old faces there. Aurelia could not endure to hear it mentioned.

"How can you ever bear to think of our little attic room and the stuffy parlor, as they call it down-stairs, after seeing these magnificent reception-rooms and the spacious grounds? Bah! But perhaps," continued Aurelia, flippantly, "*I* was intended for a lady, Margaret, and *you* were not."

"I suppose that must be the way of it, dear," returned Margaret, thoughtfully, thinking everything Aurelia said must be quite right.

In the seminary, as everywhere else, Aurelia was the best loved—gay, restless, piquant—her faults and follies were more charming than other girls' virtues in every

one's eyes. All the girls of the seminary fairly adored Aurelia, and Margaret was well content that it should be so.

These three weeks at the seminary was dark ones for Margaret. Aurelia enjoyed the new life immensely—all but the studying.

Margaret wrote home every day, but there was never a line from Aurelia. And by the tone of Margaret's letters, they guessed at the farmhouse how homesick she was.

"I reckon I'll have to take a run down to Richmond, and cheer the lassies up a bit," decided Farmer Romaine; "it's only nat'ral thet they're feelin' cast down. They've never been five miles away from the old farm before, bless their pretty heads! Their Uncle John, as they call me, can set 'em straight."

The old farmer put his determination into execution at once, though he came near changing his mind half a dozen times in the interim, declaring that he should hardly spare the time to go, for the clover-fields down by the bridge wanted mowing, and he had promised to see some hands about hay-making. With great effort, his wife got him started off at last.

It was the noon-hour when he reached the seminary. Seeing so many lovely young girls on the lawn quite bewildered him. He stopped short as he was advancing up the broad, paved walk, and, wiping his spectacles, peered eagerly about to discern Margaret and Aurelia among them.

Both girls were on the lawn at the time. Aurelia saw him first. In that instant two hands as cold as ice clutched Margaret's arm, and a horrified voice gasped in her ear:

"Oh! see what they are all making fun of—it's *Uncle John*! Don't look in that direction; if he should see us and come this way, I should die of shame—I should, indeed, Margaret!"

And at that instant, in a voice as loud as a fog-horn, the old farmer called lustily:

"Margaret—Aurelia! where are you, girls?"

CHAPTER III.

“IF I NEVER LOVE, I SHALL NEVER MARRY!”

FARMER ROMAINÉ certainly presented a very ludicrous appearance as he stood there. He never looked his best dressed up in his Sunday clothes; he felt decidedly just as he looked—awkward. He never was at his ease in a high starched collar and a cravat.

“For the love of Heaven don’t let him see us,” panted Aurelia, under her breath, with horror-stricken eyes; “let’s run away, Margaret, and hide until after he goes.”

For the first time in all her gentle life an angry fire leaped into Margaret’s sweet blue eyes.

“Oh, Aurelia, how can you talk so?” she cried, distressedly; “you grieve me beyond words—for shame!” and she tore herself free from Aurelia’s detaining hands, and flew like a swallow over the greensward, throwing herself with a cry of joy into Farmer Romainé’s arms. How could the girls laugh and make fun of this dear old Uncle John whom she loved with all her heart?

At length he called eagerly for Aurelia, but to Margaret’s dismay Aurelia was nowhere to be found.

Seeing his dear old face once more was too much for Margaret; she clung to him with kisses and tears, beseeching him to take her home with him when he went.

“Bean’t this only a whim, child?” he asked, anxiously. “Are you *quite* sure, Margy, that you’d rather be at the old farm than here?”

“Quite sure,” replied the girl, firmly, “do not leave me here, uncle.”

He was not proof against her entreaties, and when he left Hulberton Seminary, Margaret went with him. They found Aurelia waiting to greet her uncle John at the bend in the road—where all the girls could not witness it, she had said to herself. Her surprise to find Margaret with him, and to learn that she was going home with him, was great.

“I should pine away if I were to stay here any longer,” said Margaret piteously, “*do* come with us, dear.”

“She shall decide for herself,” said John Romainé,

laying his rough, kindly hand on the beautiful dark curly head. "Book-learnin' may do her a heap sight more good than chasin' butterflies round the old farm, eh, Aurelia?"

"I shall stay here, even though it parts us, Margaret," said Aurelia, drawing back from Farmer Romaine's outstretched hand. "I cannot go back to that dreary farm-life, I would die of *ennui*."

So the twin sisters were parted for the first time in their lives, whether it was for weal or for woe, is the story we have to tell.

For some time Aurelia's letters came regularly to the farmhouse; then, at length, they became less frequent—when vacation time came Aurelia pleaded so hard to be permitted to spend it with some one of her school-mates that John Romaine had not the heart to refuse her.

Margaret Lancaster's life at the farm would have been happy enough but for one drawback; for three long years that winged their slow flights by, she had not looked upon Aurelia's face. She would have been inexpressibly lonely but for a new element that had crept into her life, and that was the happiness that the return home of Gerald Romaine brought to her.

It had been long years since he had parted from Margaret, and he could scarcely believe that the tall, fair, shy young girl who advanced to greet him was, indeed, the little Margaret whom he had left behind him.

Thrown constantly together during the happy days that followed, was it any wonder that Margaret learned to love Gerald Romaine with all the strength of her heart? But she would have died ere she would have let him read her sweet secret by either glance or word.

He was certainly a handsome man—tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a cheery face and laughing blue eyes. The brow, from which the dark-brown hair was pushed carelessly back, was broad and high, and the thick, brown mustache covered a mouth that alone would have stamped his face, could it have been seen, as honest, noble and true.

The love-story of Margaret Lancaster and Gerald Romaine did not have even the usual romance about it. Probably Gerald would never have looked upon fair, pale

Margaret in the light of a sweetheart if the idea had not been suggested to him.

Mrs. Romaine was the first to notice that Margaret's heart was going out to Gerald, and she was well pleased. She read her secret in a thousand different ways—in the sudden flush at the sound of his footstep, of the girl's sweet, unnatural shyness in his presence, of the delight it seemed to give her to talk of him in his absence; and she saw, too, that Gerald was quite unconscious of it all.

She resolved upon a very diplomatic action; she would see if there was any possibility of Gerald's ever caring for Margaret; if not, she would warn the girl to never let her heart go out to any man until he had shown some preference or love for herself.

A good opportunity occurred to put her resolution into execution on the very day that it was made. She saw Gerald pacing up and down under the trees in the orchard, smoking a cigar. She threw a light shawl about her shoulders, and joined him there. He looked delighted.

"It is not often that you come out to have a chat with me, mother mine," he said, putting his white, strong hands on both of her shoulders, and looking down into her eyes a moment, then escorting her to a rustic seat.

"I wanted to have a talk with you, Gerald," she said; "not a chat, but an earnest, sober talk."

He laughed heartily.

"About my inventions?" he asked.

"Yes, about them, and about what you would do if your dreams of making fame and fortune out of them came true."

"I have never given it a thought," he said, leaning carelessly back against the gnarled trunk of an old apple-tree, taking the cigar from his mouth with his white fingers, and blowing the curling wreaths of blue smoke thoughtfully away.

"I have thought of it," she said, her voice trembling a little as she looked up at her strong, handsome son, whom she fairly idolized.

"Have you?" he said, laughing good-humoredly. "Pray unfold your plans to me, mother!"

"I should like you to marry and settle down, Gerald," she answered, very quietly.

There was nothing but sheer amazement in the face that looked back at her through the smoke-clouds.

"Have you never thought of it, Gerald?" she asked, earnestly.

"Upon my honor—no, mother," he responded, quickly.

"It is strange. I wonder why you have not, Gerald?" she queried, eagerly; "most young men have thoughts of marrying—don't they, my dear?"

"Your question is very easily answered, my dear mother," he replied, smiling. "No man ever thinks of marrying until he happens to see the right one that awakens his sleeping heart to the feeling called—love; until he meets and recognizes, by some unknown law, the one being above all others whom he believes Heaven intended for him."

"And have you never met such a one yet, Gerald?" she asked, in a very low voice.

"No," he said, thoughtfully, "never."

"Heaven help poor, pretty Margaret," was her mental comment.

"You do not know—no one but a mother can know or understand—how I worry over your future, my dear," she said; "if you marry unwisely, your whole life will be wrecked."

"What if I *never* marry at all?" he questioned.

"You are so brave and handsome, you will be *sure* to marry, dear," she declared.

"Does such a prospect please you?" he asked, amusedly.

"It is the one thought of my life, Gerald," she answered, huskily; adding, slowly: "It is said that men who are reckless and wicked, Heaven repays with reckless wives or children."

"Then I can feel safe on that score, mother," he answered seriously; "I have never been reckless—I have never trifled with women, and made their hearts fair game; I have revered all your sex for your sake, mother."

"I should like to know your opinion on a subject that

has been weighing very heavily on my mind for some time past, Gerald," she said.

"You have but to speak, mother," he answered, seating himself on the rustic bench beside her.

"Suppose," said Mrs. Romaine slowly, "that a girl, young and beautiful—all that is most graceful and gracious, meets a man and likes him so well that her liking grows into love for him, and that love takes possession of her, should you think less of this young girl for her great secret affection for this man who had shown no signs of any for her?"

"No, certainly not," he replied; "to love or not to love is ordained by a higher power. It is not her fault, it is her fate to love him."

"Would you think it prudent, or discreet if some of her friends, some one who loved her, told him of it?"

"I should think it a wise thing to do," he replied carelessly, "for then he could guard against the slightest action or word that might give her encouragement if he did not care for her."

"Thank Heaven I hear *you* say that!" cried Mrs. Romaine, huskily. "You have such noble principles, my boy, you would do right."

"Why, what has that to do with me, mother?" cried Gerald, in astonishment.

She laid her hand on his arm, whispering softly:

"I know of a young girl who has given all the love of her heart to you, Gerald—whose life is wrapped up, so to speak, in yours."

"Why, mother, you must be mistaken," he cried; "you certainly are mistaken. I know of no young girl who takes even a passing interest in me."

"Try and think," she said. "Ponder well. You certainly have not been so blind as not to see, despite all her shyness."

He shook his head, declaring he could think of no one, and begging her to tell him who the young girl was. His curiosity was greatly aroused.

"Yes, I will tell you, Gerald," said Mrs. Romaine. "I hope to Heaven I am acting wisely. The young girl who loves you so well is—our Margaret—Margaret Lancaster."

CHAPTER IV.

“WILL HIS LOVE PROVE TRUE—OR FALSE?”

WHAT Gerald Romaine's thoughts were when he found himself alone can better be imagined than described.

Margaret loved him! Why, the thought seemed impossible. But, now that he came to look into the idea more closely, a thousand memories rushed over his mind that substantiated the truth of it—of looks, words, of flushed cheeks and downcast, sweet, shy eyes—the true meaning of which he had not understood until now.

How blind he had been! He had always said to himself that a man would understand even the faintest sign of a woman's regard; but had *he* understood?

He did not love Margaret; in all the six-and-twenty years of his life he had never given one thought to love, yet, somehow, it made his heart beat the quicker to know that he could awaken love in the heart of a girl like Margaret Lancaster.

“There was but one course to pursue,” Gerald Romaine told himself, “and that was to leave the farm; with time and absence she would soon forget him.”

He made arrangements to leave that very night; and the time came when he must tell Margaret he was going, and say good-bye to her.

He had no opportunity to speak with her that afternoon, but he knew of her custom of strolling down to the little brook beyond the clover meadow, where the light of the stars lay pale and white on the sleeping flowers; and he followed her there.

Margaret was made aware of his presence when he touched her lightly on the arm.

“Are you day-dreaming, Margaret?” he cried cheerily; “I have been standing here for the last five minutes and spoken to you twice, and you have not even heard me. How far away your thoughts must have been wandering.”

She gave a violent start, and he saw the rich color surge over her face in a great crimson wave. She shrank back from him abashed—ah, if he had but known where her thoughts were.

“Let me tell you why I have sought you here, Margaret,” he said, lightly. “I am here to say good-bye; I am going away from the farm to-night.”

The words fell on the summer air like a death-knell, the light seemed to suddenly die from the stars and the world to stand still.

“How long shall you be gone, Gerald?” she asked, and he looked at her in wonder, the sweet voice was so changed.

“As Professor Crouch sings in his sweet ‘Kathleen Mavourneen’:

“‘It may be for years and it may be forever,’” he answered, lightly.

A great wave of sorrow and desolation swept over her, great, blinding tears sprung to her eyes, and, though she strove with superhuman effort to keep them back, they *would* brim over and roll down her cheeks.

The words had smitten her as a sudden and heavy storm of hail breaks down a fragrant flower. The light left her eyes, and her face grew white and cold as death, and he could not but help see her emotion.

“Are you sorry that I am going, Margaret?” he asked quickly, taking her little cold hands pityingly in his.

She could not have answered him if her very life depended on it; words seemed to choke her, she could only bow her head in token of assent.

Is there a man in the wide world that can see a lovely girl weep, and know that her tears are shed on his account, without his heart being touched, if he has one?

Gerald Romaine was tender of heart, and impulsive; his one thought was to comfort Margaret, and all in a moment he uttered words that he was to rue all his after life. They seemed to fall from his lips before he was aware of it. He said that he would stay if she was sorry to lose him, and that if she wished, she should be his wife.

He never forgot the face she raised to his—love had made it fairly glorious.

“Am I to stay under those conditions—or go?”

She held out her hands to him and whispered—
“Stay!”

For a moment there was silence between them,

deep, unbroken silence, save for the night winds that rustled through the trees overhead. The brook at their feet ran on to the river, and the river ran on to the sea, but did not whisper to them what their lives would widen into, or the dark fate that hung over them.

"Have you thought wisely in consenting to be my wife, Margaret?" he asked, as they walked slowly back, hand in hand, to the house. "You know I am what the world calls a poor man; I have great ambition, I have great hopes in my inventions, still, I may be following a chimera. They may amount to naught—then I should have only the prospects of this farm in the time to come. Would you love me as faithfully if I could not provide the luxuries for you which other women crave? Could you consent to spend your life here with me, or go where I go—no matter how humble the life?"

In all the after years, years of darkest sorrow and pain, he never forgot the sweet eyes raised to his, and the answer that fell from her tremulous lips.

"I say to you, Gerald, what Ruth said to her lover," she murmured softly: "'Where thou goest I shall go, where thou stayest I shall stay, thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest I shall die, and there will I be buried.'"

"Sweetest Margaret," he murmured, "I should feel myself a happy man to be blessed by so noble and true a love."

Mrs. Romaine was delighted over their betrothal, and declared that matters were just as they should be, and that the dearest wish of her heart would be fulfilled when they were married.

For three weeks Margaret was supremely happy, Gerald was a most devoted lover; there was one trait about his *fiancee* that amused him vastly. There was no surfeit of kisses in their case. Margaret believed that kisses were for a husband's lips, not for a lover's—certainly an excellent example for young girls to follow.

Those were the brightest days of Margaret's life. How unutterably sweet the thought was to her that in a few, short fleeting months, when the spring flowers bloomed on the hillock again, she would be Gerald's wife—his wife. It almost seemed to Margaret that it was too sweet a dream to ever become a reality.

Somehow she could not write about it to Aurelia, her nature was shy. It seemed too pure and sacred a subject for Aurelia to ridicule, as she certainly was apt to do; she would tell her about it when she came home.

They were expecting her every day now.

It had been three long years since she had parted from Aurelia, and her heart hungered for her. And it had been nearly twelve years since Gerald had seen Aurelia, and he had but a faint recollection of the face the portrait in the best room represented.

For a fortnight great preparations had been going on at the farmhouse in honor of Aurelia's return, and at length the long-looked-for day and hour rolled around which was to bring her.

It had been arranged that Gerald should drive over to the station to meet the train; but just as he was about to start, he received a telegram summoning him at once to New York, and he had barely time to catch his own train. Thus it devolved upon John Romaine to take his son's place in the old-fashioned carry-all to go and meet Aurelia.

And this brings us back, dear reader, to the opening scene in our first chapter.

Margaret counted the moments with the utmost impatience, until in the dim distance afar down the white serpentine road, she beheld the returning vehicle.

In a flash Margaret was at the gate; and in a few minutes more the lumbering carry-all reached her, and without waiting for assistance, Aurelia Lancaster sprang out.

For an instant Margaret was held fairly spell-bound—speechless; was this magnificent girl, with the dazzling beauty of an *houri*, her sister Aurelia? Was there ever a more lovely creature than the one upon which her astonished eyes rested—from the dark, curly head, half concealed by the broad leghorn hat, with its drooping plumes, to the toe of the dainty kid boot that peeped out from beneath the skirts of her gray silk trailing cloak? The great cluster of deep-red passion roses she held in her hands completed the picture.

As she gazed, a quick, sharp pain that made her faint as death for an instant shot through her heart—she could

not even understand it then; in the dark after-days she realized what it meant too well.

With a glad cry she reached Aurelia's side and flung her arms about her beautiful sister, straining her close to her heart, raining kisses on the rosy, dimpled cheeks, the crimson lips, and the white hands that held the roses.

In return Aurelia gave her only one hasty kiss, and struggled desperately to get out of Margaret's loving, incircling arms.

"Goodness gracious! don't crush me, Margaret," she cried, "do let me get my breath—you are wrinkling the ribbons of my coat all up."

Margaret quickly released her, drawing back, pale and shocked.

"Oh, Aurelia, are you not glad to be with us once again?" she cried, tremulously, tears coming to her blue eyes.

"Of course," returned Aurelia, impatiently; "but I'm tired, I want to get into the house out of this broiling sun."

Margaret followed her into the house silently—a little hurt.

But no one could feel angry with Aurelia long; gay, audacious, willful, loving, she seemed to carry every heart with which she came in contact by storm, in spite of all efforts at resistance.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, how can you endure life here, Margaret?" cried Aurelia that evening, when they found themselves alone. "I think I should die if I were forced to remain here. Is there no young gentlemen about?"

"Only one—Gerald Romaine—he will return in a day or so; he was called to New York to-day, as his mother told you," said Margaret, blushing crimson. She was just about to reveal to her sister the sweet secret of what made her life so happy, when the next sentence that Aurelia uttered froze the words on her lips.

Aurelia yawned.

"He will hardly pay to flirt with, unless one is desperate," she said. "What is he like? Is he good-looking or ugly? Can he make himself agreeable, or is he stupid? Is there anything romantic about him, or is he

a dull, prosaic, country foggy, stiff and proper? He was rather good-looking as a boy, if I remember him right, and the years he has spent at college ought to have brought out whatever chic and dash there is in his composition. College fellows are a gay lot to flirt with."

"Stop!" cried Margaret, in a pained voice; "oh, Aurelia, how can you talk so? I know you could not mean it—but it shocked me. Gerald is handsomer as a man than he was as a boy," she went on falteringly, in a low voice; "he is tall and fair. He would not flirt, Aurelia; Gerald is a man of honor—a gentleman."

A gay, rollicking laugh broke from Aurelia's red lips.

"Oh, Margaret, you little simpleton, how you amuse me," she cried, gayly. "Mr. Gerald Romaine will not flirt?—well, we shall see about that. I'll tell you what I'll do, Margy," she added, eagerly, leaning her dimpled chin upon her white hand; "I'll wager you that pink coral bracelet of mine, that you admire so much, that Gerald Romaine falls desperately in love with me at first sight—all men do—and that I can flirt with him to my heart's content. There now, what do you say to that? No matter if he ever cared for any one else. I COULD WIN HIM FROM HER."

Margaret could speak no word—her lips were stricken dumb. A sudden, awful horror filled her heart, that could never be put into words. Was the dread premonition of coming evil, that had seemed to settle over her within the last few hours, to take shape in this way? Only Heaven could have foretold.

"You would not try to win him from another, Aurelia," said Margaret, huskily; "you are too noble for that, dear."

"Wouldn't I!" cried Aurelia, with a gay laugh. "Why, that would make him all the more desirable prey in my eyes. If I find that he is handsome and worth the trouble, *you shall see.*"

Margaret lifted her white face to the star-gemmed sky, her lips moved, but no sound fell from them. Her whole soul seemed to shrink from Aurelia. She would not tell her that she was to be Gerald's wife, and that she loved him so well that it would be death in life to her if he were taken from her. Not yet—no, not yet.

She would wait and see, first, if Gerald's love would not prove faithful and true.

CHAPTER V.

A MUTUAL ATTRACTION AT FIRST SIGHT.

AURELIA LANCASTER looked curiously at the face of the girl standing there before her, in the cold, bright moonlight.

What was it that made Margaret look so unnaturally pale? She reminded her of a marble statue.

"Shall we go into the house, Aurelia?" asked Margaret, shivering as with sudden chill.

"No, indeed," declared Aurelia, "it is ever so much nicer out here in the moonlight, amongst the roses, and then we had just commenced to talk about such an interesting subject; let me see what it was—oh, yes, about Gerald Romaine. I was telling you if I find him good-looking, you shall see how quickly he shall be made to fall in love with me. Don't look at me in that shocked way, Margaret, it is really too dreadful," and Aurelia threw back her dark curly head and went off into such a ringing peal of laughter that it startled the birds from their nests in the old apple-tree over her head.

"I am sure you do not mean it, dear; you are only jesting," said Margaret, distressedly, "the words sound so heartless, so cruel. One should never jest about a human heart—or—or—about—love," she added falteringly. "I could never do it."

"Margaret, you are such a goody-goody creature that you will certainly be the death of me," cried Aurelia, "but of course it is all due to your vegetating here on this dull old farm. Why, at school I flirted with every male creature that crossed my path."

"I thought Miss Hulburton did not allow such things?" cried Margaret, aghast.

"Allow! Oh, Margy—what charming innocence—simplicity—it is distracting—but it actually amuses me," declared Aurelia, her dimples rising like tricky sprites among the deepened roses on her cheeks. "Don't you understand that it was our chief aim to do what we were not allowed? Men, I admit, were scarce.

The German professor was engaged to one of the teachers; but I flirted with him until she nearly cried her eyes out, and after he had withstood me three whole months he surrendered at last. Then I told him I wouldn't marry him to save his life. The French teacher vowed that he couldn't live without me, and the music-master fell so conspicuously in love with me that madam dismissed him and installed a regular termagant of an old maid, in green goggles, in his place. Oh, Margy, I had such fun with them."

"Oh, my darling!" sighed Margaret, wistfully, "I hope you have not turned out to be as soulless as you are beautiful. Come, let us go into the house. See, the dew is falling; how heavy it lies on the flowers and the green leaves."

With a yawn Aurelia followed her sister, and in less than half an hour after she was sleeping the sleep of youth, which knows no thought, no care, with her pink, flushed cheek, swept by those long, curling lashes, lying against her white, rounded arm, and the dark-brown curls sweeping like a veil over the white pillow.

For long hours Margaret stood by the window, looking up at the golden stars and the white clouds scurrying across the night sky—looked without seeing—for her thoughts were elsewhere.

"I will trust blindly in his love," the girl said slowly to herself, clasping her white hands over her beating heart. "I feel sure his affection can never swerve. I am his betrothed wife; surely I must have faith in him. But—Aurelia is so beautiful, and I—am—so plain!"

That night, for the first time in all the years of her life, Margaret fell asleep with her blue eyes drowned in tears, and she dreamed troubled dreams. Was it a fore-warning of what the future would be like?

Margaret was up with the sun the next morning, despite the lateness of the hour when she had retired the previous night.

Mrs. Romaine stopped with her churning and looked up as the girl entered the room. Her quick eyes detected in a moment how pale the fair face had grown.

"Did you sit up late last night, Margaret?" she questioned, solicitously—"you look so tired this morning."

"A little later than usual," the girl confessed.

All through the breakfast Mrs. Romaine noticed that there was something on Margaret's mind. Even John Romaine noticed that she was unusually quiet, and taxed her with it.

"I was just thinking of asking a favor of you and Aunt Rachel," she replied, quietly. "You must not question my motive, nor——"

"You can consider it granted beforehand, Margy," broke in John Romaine, cheerily. "I couldn't refuse you anything you had set your heart on, and you ought to know it by this time, little girl."

"It is only this," replied Margaret, in a low voice. "I—I want my betrothal kept a—a—secret from Aurelia for a little while yet;" adding, nervously, "I—I—want you both to promise me you will not divulge it to her."

Farmer Romaine looked at Margaret in unfeigned astonishment. Mrs. Romaine laughed heartily.

"If there's one thing in this world that puzzles me it's wimmen," he declared, looking in bewilderment at Margaret. "However, I'm perfectly willing to humor your whim. I'll say nothing about it."

Mrs. Romaine's consent was quite as easily gained.

"Whatever Margaret wished done, was always right and proper to do," she argued.

It was late when Aurelia put in an appearance; she came dancing into the old kitchen like a veritable sunbeam, and before nightfall everybody about the farmhouse had declared it was quite a different place since Miss Aurelia had come back. Gay, variable as April sunshine, all felt the subtle influence of her presence, and worshiped her on sight.

It pleased Margaret to see her so idolized, but her pleasure was mixed with one great fear—would Gerald's heart go out to beautiful Aurelia, as the hearts of all the others had gone out to her?

And the pale lips murmured over and over again:

"Heaven will keep him true to me—he is all I have."

That night passed much as the previous one, and again on the morrow Margaret rose early, for this was the day of Gerald's return. He would reach the farm early in the afternoon.

The noon meal was over, and both girls rose from the table simultaneously.

“What are you going to do with yourself, Margy, to kill time?” queried Aurelia.

“I—I have something very important to do,” replied Margaret, with a deep blush.

“I think I’ll take a book and go down to the orchard and read,” declared Aurelia; adding, petulantly: “I think it would make me desperate to live this kind of a life, Margy—I should die of *ennui*. I have only been here two days, but it seems two years.”

“If you’d busy yourself with work, like your sister does, you wouldn’t find time hanging so heavily on your hands,” said Mrs. Romaine, sharply, looking at the petulant little beauty over the rim of her spectacles.

The lovely red lips curled scornfully.

“Margy loves to work; I don’t,” said Aurelia, tossing back her dark, curly head; “and, every one to her fancy, Aunt Romaine. I like a butterfly life—I don’t see why I wasn’t born one—resting on rose-leaves, flitting about in a sunshiny world, that is full of laughter and leisure.”

“You are just about as useless as one, my dear,” declared Mrs. Romaine, adding, emphatically: “Book-learnin’ may be a good thing, but all the fine schoolin’ you got—and it cost a heap o’ money—hain’t put much sense in your head, that’s certain. The idea of a sensible young woman wishin’ she had been born a butterfly! Good Lord! Who ever heard o’ the like!”

“I thought you said that I was *not* sensible,” said Aurelia, with a gay, malicious little laugh. And with this parting shot she caught up her book and sun-hat, and danced merrily out of the old farmhouse kitchen, in the direction of the orchard that lay beyond.

Meanwhile Margaret walked slowly through the waving corn-fields, in the direction of the main road. There was an old-fashioned stile, which separated the farm from the road, and when Margaret reached this she paused.

“I shall not have to wait long,” she murmured, glancing eagerly at the sun-dial hard by; “Gerald will be here very soon now.”

Even as she spoke she caught sight of a moving figure in the dim distance. She knew, she felt by the way her

heart began to beat, that it was he for whom she watched and waited.

It was quite three miles to the station, but Gerald Romaine would have laughed at the idea of sending the buggy over to him; five times that distance would have been nothing for him to have walked.

The advancing figure came nearer and nearer with great swinging strides—so near now that Margaret could see his face. Yes, it was Gerald.

The girl's face flushed and paled, and she clasped her hands nervously over her heart to stop its wild, glad throbbing.

"How dearly I love him," she said to herself, the smile deepening on her lips; "how much, only Heaven knows."

By the time Gerald Romaine approached, the flush had faded from her face, the wild heart beats had died down—only the sweet, rare smile remained on her fair face—the same quiet smile that always greeted him.

"Margaret!" he exclaimed, hurrying eagerly forward, "finding you here to welcome me is indeed a surprise."

He had gained her side, and, stooping down, laid his lips lightly, carelessly, upon the white forehead of the fair face upturned to him, and clasped in both of his her extended hand.

"It cannot be possible that you have missed me?" he said, laughing.

"I think I have, Gerald," she answered in a low voice, "but that is not what brings me here; I—I—wanted to have a little talk with you."

"As long as you like, dear," he said. It was the first time he had ever uttered the word "dear," to her, and Margaret never forgot the sound of it on his lips. "Shall it be here, Margaret?" he asked.

"No," she said a little nervously, "we will walk slowly to the house and talk as we go."

CHAPTER VI.

THE HEART OF MAN.

MARGARET and Gerald walked on, hand in hand together in their utter silence, for a moment.

“You wanted to talk to me, Margy,” he said smilingly, “but you seem in no hurry to begin.”

“I wanted to tell you, first of all, Gerald, that Aurelia has come,” she said, raising her shy sweet eyes to his.

“Why, to be sure, so she must have,” said Gerald. “I declare I actually forgot to ask you about it—of course you are delighted to have her with you again. But I do hope,” he went on carelessly, “that her coming will not interfere with our pleasant rambles; you are so devotedly attached to Aurelia.”

“Thank God that he will be faithful and true to me,” thought Margaret, looking up at the silent heavens; she had forgotten that he had not yet seen Aurelia.

“I suppose she is quite a fine lady,” he pursued—“young girls just home from boarding-school always imagine themselves that—and farm life will be dull for her. Is she looking well?”

“You shall soon judge for yourself,” said Margaret, wistfully.

“This is what I wanted to speak to you about, Gerald—I have a favor to ask of you, which you must grant; and without asking my reason.”

“Consider the promise given beforehand, Margaret; you know you could ask no favor that I would not grant if it lay within my power.”

Still she hesitated.

“You know you may speak to me freely, Margaret,” he added earnestly—“why do you hesitate?”

“I am afraid my request will seem strange, Gerald,” she faltered—“but I—I—want you to promise compliance with that which I ask—simply to please me.”

“You arouse my curiosity wonderfully, Margy,” he declared.

“It is only this which I want you to promise me, Gerald,” she said, the color coming and going swiftly on her cheeks, “that you will not let Aurelia know of our betrothal just yet. Promise me, Gerald, that you will not.

I have made the same request of your father and mother, and—to—to—please me they have agreed to—to—say nothing about it.”

“Do you know, Margaret,” he said, looking at her keenly, “that I always believed you incapable of keeping one single thought back from one whom you loved? you surprise me; of course I will not mention it to her if you say so; anyhow I should suppose you would like to break anything of that kind to your sister yourself. Of course, I promise you, to please you, Margaret, I shall not mention it until you wish me to do so. Does that satisfy you?”

“Yes,” she answered tremulously, and the little hand that he still held clasped in his, trembled slightly.

“Come around by the orchard and I will present you to Aurelia; she is reading there under the trees; you know she has not seen you since you were a boy—she would not remember you—come, Gerald.”

“Not just yet, Margaret,” he said, quickly; “why, I have had hardly a moment to talk to you; I want to tell you of my trip to New York, and the result of it.”

They walked up and down together an hour under the trees, while he told her of his hopes and future plans, and that, Heaven help her, was the happiest hour of Margaret Lancaster’s life. As Gerald talked to her, her hopes rose like a fairy air-ship. Ah, how mad she had been to let the cruel cloud of doubt overcast her sky even for a moment. He would be loyal to her to the heart’s core, her noble Gerald.

“He had never shown much demonstration of affection, but then it was not his nature to be demonstrative; still, he must love her, a man surely *must* have a deep, true love for the young girl whom he asks to be his wife,” she said to herself.

At length they turned toward the house, and their way led through the orchard.

They were talking earnestly together, as they walked along under the trees, both absorbed in the conversation, when suddenly Gerald Romaine stopped short, riveted to the spot—the words he was uttering died on his lips, he forgot to finish the sentence.

Raising his eyes suddenly, as he advanced, he had caught sight of Aurelia, and Gerald Romaine stood still

with surprise, and the heart of the girl by his side turned cold as she saw the passionate admiration in his face. He stood like one fascinated, unconscious of everything around him but the dazzling brilliancy and the exquisite beauty of the girl before him.

He saw a slight, girlish form in a pink mull dress, standing under an old apple-tree; her face was turned slightly toward them, and her two arms—white, rounded, and beautiful—from which the pink sleeve fell half way, were upraised, and the little white fingers were breaking off sprays of white blossoms from the down-drooping boughs.

Gerald Romaine's eyes traveled from that slim, perfect form, which would have charmed a sculptor, to the girl's exquisite face—dark, dimpled, and sparkling—with a flush on the cheek and lips like the crimson heart of a red wild rose, crowned in dark, curling hair, and eyes so dark, dazzling and intense, that, as she turned them on him in a startled way, the glance fairly took his breath away. The heart in his bosom seemed to throb with a new sensation—a sense of pleasure so great, it was almost pain.

Margaret looked into Gerald's flushed face and kindling eyes, and her own face grew white to the lips with the horrible fear that had seized her.

She controlled herself by the greatest effort, and taking Gerald by the hand, advanced.

"Aurelia," she said, and the sound of her voice was so weird, she wondered that they did not notice it, "this is Gerald, the playmate of our childhood; surely you have not forgotten him?"

Aurelia took a step forward, her red lips parting in a dazzling smile as she held out her slim white hand. She gave him one glance from those great wine-dark, wonderful eyes, and he never afterward had a distinct idea of what she said, or how he answered her.

"Let us sit down here on the grass, in the shade of this old tree and chat," said Aurelia, and without turning to ask Margaret's pleasure in the matter, he flung himself straightway at the beauty's feet.

"Sit down, Margy," said Aurelia in her sweetest voice, "while Gerald and I chat over old times. I sup-

pose it is the proper thing to do—to call you Gerald. Mr. Romaine sounds so awfully formal.”

“Do call me Gerald,” he cried, eagerly, and he had to check himself from adding impulsively: “The name never sounded so sweet on woman’s lips before.”

He seemed to quite forget that Margaret was standing there.

“Do sit down, Margy,” repeated Aurelia, gayly; and, although Gerald did not second the invitation, Margaret sat down.

An hour passed, and still the conversation was kept up between Gerald and Aurelia with unflagging interest. Once or twice Gerald turned to Margaret with some commonplace remark, but at one bright smile from Aurelia he instantly forgot her again.

Ah, he never looked at *her* with eyes like that, nor was his manner so impassioned or eager. This was a phase of Gerald’s nature that was new to Margaret. Still, for all that, she made excuses for him in her thoughts. No woman liked to believe that her empire over the heart she craves, and which in time past has loved her, is completely over. No, she will not bring herself to believe it until the knowledge is forced upon her.

Margaret tried to convince herself that Gerald was trying to make himself agreeable to Aurelia for duty’s sake.

At length an interruption came, in the shape of a message for Aurelia, from the farmhouse, that Mrs. Romaine wanted her.

Aurelia arose at once, shaking the white blossoms from her lap, tossing them all in a shower over Gerald, with the sweetest, gayest laugh in the world, and hurried away, leaving Gerald and Margaret sitting there alone.

Would he turn to her eagerly, glad that they were alone together again? No; his eyes followed the slim, girlish form flitting over the clover meadow, and his whole heart was in that gaze; and there was a dreamy, musing smile on his lips.

Margaret saw him raise one of the white apple blossoms that had fallen on his breast to his lips. She

touched him on the arm, and that gentle touch recalled him to himself. He started violently.

"Is not Aurelia beautiful?" she asked.

"As beautiful as a poet's dream—the very embodiment of girlish loveliness," he declared, and as he spoke his cheeks flushed, and his eyes kindled again. "How strange it seems to me, Margaret," he went on musingly, "that you and Aurelia are twin sisters; you are no more alike than sunshine and shadow."

"Which is like shadow, Gerald?" she asked in a low voice. He looked greatly confused; the words had sprung from his lips unconsciously.

"Your sister is like the restless sunshine—you are like the cool, sweet, restful shade. She is so gay one would realize that she was but a thoughtless schoolgirl of seventeen, *you* are so wise—so calm—so sensible—— Ah, well, why follow up comparisons where both are so perfect, each in her own way. Come, Margaret, let us go into the house—it is tiresome sitting here."

On the way back to the house he talked of Aurelia—nothing but Aurelia.

"We must have our usual moonlight ramble to-night, Margaret," he said, adding eagerly, "and perhaps you can get Aurelia to join us, *do* try."

Aurelia went with them, and the hour that followed was but a repetition of the afternoon scene; Aurelia enjoyed it—there was but one heavy heart amongst the trio, and that beat in Margaret's breast.

"This," said Gerald, as he parted from them that night, "has been the happiest day of my life."

Aurelia blushed—Margaret's face grew as white as the white roses on the clambering vines outside the window.

CHAPTER VII.

"OH, CONSTANCY, THOU ART A JEWEL."

"MARGARET," cried Aurelia, when the two girls found themselves alone together that night, "how does it happen that in describing Gerald Romaine to me, you never told me how very agreeable he was?"

"I am very glad you find him so, dear," replied Margaret, trying to smile.

"I wonder, too," Aurelia went on, "that knowing such a man, you have never fallen in love with him. You must be as unimpressionable as marble. But then, perhaps, he is not your ideal."

"Is he *your* ideal?" asked Margaret, quickly.

"I like him better than anybody I have seen *so far*," declared Aurelia, "but I cannot say whether I should like him well enough to marry him—or not."

"You must not think about—marrying him—until—he asks you," responded Margaret, in a very low, husky voice.

"He is sure to do that very soon," declared Aurelia, laughing a low, soft laugh. "Why, Margy, did you not see?"

"See what?" asked Margaret, in a voice more husky still.

"Why, that he was in love with me from the first moment that we met! I feel it—I am sure of it. Don't look so terribly shocked. I do actually believe he could have asked me to marry him then and there. I saw it in his eyes."

Margaret listened with a face pale, but calm, though the fiery lashes of a whip could not have stung her more than those thoughtless words Aurelia had uttered. Was his love for her so weak that it could die at sight of a fairer face? No, she would not—she could not believe it.

For long hours after the rest of the inmates of the farmhouse were asleep, Gerald Romaine paced the orchard to and fro, smoking his cigar—and thinking.

"I cannot imagine what is coming over me," he muttered, impatiently, stopping short under the trees. "I cannot rest—I cannot eat—cannot sleep. Life seems all different with me since—*this afternoon*."

In one moment a star has fallen from heaven—in one moment earthquakes have destroyed fair cities—in one moment Gerald Romaine had awakened from the indifference which was wrapped like a mantle about his heart to the first throb of real love his heart had ever known, as he stood there transfixed in the orchard, his eyes

riveted for the first time upon the glorious beauty of Aurelia Lancaster.

He thought it was admiration that thrilled through his heart with such an electric shock; he never dreamed it was *love*--he would never have owned it--he would have been the first to deny it most bitterly, and would have believed in his own denial; but all the same it was perfectly true that when he first looked into Aurelia's dazzling face, he loved her with a love that was his doom.

He walked up and down under the trees, asking himself what could be the meaning of these strange sensations that had taken possession of him--the fever that flushed his face when he thought of Aurelia's dark bright eyes, and the cold that froze him and gave him a foretaste of the bitterness of death when he said to himself that it was because he was to be her future--brother.

When he closed his eyes in sleep that night his last thought was of Aurelia--when he opened his eyes the next morning, he found her name on his lips--he had been dreaming of her.

The summer days glided on, and at Romaine Farm a strange drama in real life was being enacted. Two hearts were blithe and gay enough--and one was breaking.

There was no more rambles alone over the pink clover fields for Gerald and Margaret, for he was always anxious that Aurelia should come with them, and Margaret wrapped herself in a mantle of pride, making no complaint.

One incident happened at last that changed the whole course of the three lives of those who were drifting on so swiftly and so surely to the brink of a precipice, and it happened in this way:

They had gone out for a row on the water one moonlight night, and at Aurelia's suggestion they headed their skiff for a little island lying down the river afar out in midstream.

"What a regular Eden," cried Aurelia, springing out of the boat, disdaining Gerald's eager hand; "what a delightful spot for a picnic--do let us explore it."

"Not to-night," said Margaret, "I feel tired, my head aches."

She might have added, too, with truth, "and my heart pains worse than my head."

"Sit down and rest here, Margaret," said Gerald, eagerly, "and if Aurelia is so anxious to see the island, I will show her around it—you shall rest."

"Do you really wish to show her around, and—and leave me here?" faltered Margaret, in a low voice.

"Yes," he asserted eagerly, "you shall not tire yourself. We will manage without you, I feel quite sure."

Margaret sank down upon a mossy stone, and it was not until the sound of their gay, laughing voices were lost in the distance that she gave herself up to the full *abandon* of her grief, laying her face down upon the cold stone and sobbing as though her gentle heart would break.

She was beginning to see matters as they really were—the scales of blinded delusion were falling from her eyes at last.

Was this the end of her dream of a happy home and a loving husband, who was to love her better than the whole world beside? Had he loved her with so feeble an apology of affection that it had died out of his heart when he saw the fair face of Aurelia? If so, what was such a love worth?

Had she tasted happiness but to lose it? Had she dreamed a love-dream but to wake and find it vanished? Ah, Heaven! she had been so unspeakably happy, and now, without warning, the cup of happiness had been dashed from her lips—the blissful delusion had been dispelled.

In her despair she realized how much she loved him as she knelt there lonely, weeping, broken-hearted. Was it fair because Aurelia had the brightness of the stars in her eyes, and lilies and roses in her dimpled cheeks and curved lips, that she should take her lover from her? Was it fair that he should go off so happily with Aurelia, while she sat there neglected, stretching out her arms to empty air?

An hour passed slowly by, and yet another dragged its slow length along, and yet Gerald and Aurelia had not returned to her. Margaret was terrified at being left so long alone, and called aloud to them at length. Surely she would hear her voice wherever they were, the island

was not so large, but only the echo of her own voice came back to her. Again she called to them, but with the same result, and with a nameless fear in her heart that could not be shaped into words, she started out to search for them. Surely this was but a cruel jest—if they intended it for that—to tease her.

She made a tour of the entire island, calling them as she hurried along. At last she reached the spot where the boat had been tied. One glance, and then a great cry of terror broke from her ashen lips—*the boat was gone!* She threw up her white hands, and, without a moan, sunk down on the very brink of the tide-washed sands in a deep faint.

Slowly the tide rose, creeping nearer and nearer to the stark, white, upturned face, framed in its pale, curling hair. It would not be long ere those curling, feathery waves would creep over that still, white face, and shut it out from the gaze of the pitying moon—for the water was rising higher and higher.

Owing to the recent heavy freshets thereabouts, the river was swollen. It was no unusual thing for the little island to be completely submerged for days at this season of the year.

But to return to Gerald Romaine and Aurelia.

They had wandered over the island, and he had pointed out to her every beautiful nook about the place, until at last she grew tired of the rough, uneven paths.

“If you would but lean on me, Aurelia,” he breathed, gently, “or sit down here and rest awhile, and let me talk to you.”

“There is the boat down there; I would rather sit in that,” she answered.

Gerald was only too eager to obey her slightest wish. In helping her into the boat he had held her in his arms for one brief instant, and the sweet passion maddened him.

An uncontrollable longing came to him to have her all to himself for a few brief moments, to talk to her. If he could but sit with her hands clasped in his for a little while, earth could hold no greater bliss for him.

He was not strong enough to withstand the sweet temptation.

“I will untie the boat and we will drift with the tide

a few yards down the stream," he said; "you shall take a lesson in rowing back, if you will."

To this Aurelia agreed, and the little boat with its two occupants was soon floating swiftly down the stream with the tide.

It was so sweet to sit there alone with this girl whom he had learned to idolize so madly—in the bright white moonlight, and watch her dazzling, beautiful face, and the little white hands trailing idly through the waters in which the stars danced as golden as in the night sky overhead which reflected them. Her beauty fairly bewitched him.

Who has not known the delights of lovers' hours that flit by swift-winged? What lover counts them, or knows how they have passed? They seemed like moments gliding by, sweet and bright as a beautiful dream.

He gave himself up to the magic witchery of the hour; he bent nearer Aurelia, and drew her little white hand from the dimpling waves, and the thought pulsed madly through his brain: Ah, would that he could hold it clasped thus, forever and forever. We wondered if, had he been free, he could ever have won the love of a peerless girl like this. If—he—had—but been free! Great Heaven! that thought brought him with a shock to—Margaret.

CHAPTER VIII.

"TAKE MY ANSWER WITH YOU THROUGH LIFE."

HE would spend just five minutes more with Aurelia ere he turned the boat around to go back for Margaret, Gerald told himself. It would be but a few blissful moments stolen out of a fleeting lifetime—why should he deny himself that comfort?

It was delightful to sit there holding those slim, white hands, listening to her gay laughter and ready wit, looking into the heaven of those dark, wondrous eyes.

To Aurelia it was pleasant to float down with the tide, listening to the low-breathed words of this handsome young fellow, whose every look, every action told her how madly he was in love with her.

"What should you do, Gerald," she asked, laughing.

ly, "if the skiff should overturn in this, the deepest part of the water? Would you make for the shore and save yourself, or——"

"Aurelia," he cut in hurriedly, drawing back from her with a white, pained face, "can it be possible you think so meanly of me as that? Why, darling!" he cried, huskily, forgetting in the intensity of the thought, the endearing language that fell from his lips, "I would save your life at the risk of my own."

"In preference to saving that of any one else in the whole wide world?" questioned Aurelia, in a low voice.

"Yes," he answered, drawing her toward him.

"Why?" she whispered, giving him another glance from those wine-dark eyes that no man had ever resisted.

The spell of the moment carried him away; he threw prudence to the winds, and answered her from the very depths of his heart:

"Because I love you! yes, I love you, Aurelia!" he cried; "I love you so well that if I could not save you I would want to die with you."

And, as he spoke, he caught her in his arms and kissed the lovely mouth, the dark eyes and dazzling face, repeating over and over again that he loved her better than life itself, and begging her to tell him that she cared for him just a little in return.

Aurelia struggled out of his arms with a saucy little laugh.

"Well, if you do love me, don't quite crush me," she cried.

"But tell me, Aurelia, do you—can you ever care for me?" he urged. "You must tell me, darling."

"I'll have to make up my mind whether I do or not, and I'll tell you——"

"When?" he cuts in eagerly again.

"Perhaps to-morrow," she answers, her vanity flattered by the eagerness in his face, but the next instant the smile on her lips gives place to a sort of gasp. "Look, Gerald!" she cries in consternation, "look! there is the farmhouse—we are miles away from the island—and Margaret!"

Gerald grew white to the lips. Great Heaven! how completely he had forgotten Margaret.

It seemed to him that all in a moment he had fallen from the heights of heaven to earth. He glanced at his watch in the clear bright moonlight, and saw that nearly two hours had passed.

"There is but one thing to do, Aurelia," he said hurriedly, "and that is to leave you here at the house and go back myself after your—your sister."

To this Aurelia readily agreed.

As he helped her out of the boat, holding her in his arms an instant again, he could not resist the impulse, strong as life itself, to press her to his heart and murmur hoarsely:

"I—I must see you alone, to-morrow morning, in the orchard, Aurelia. I—I have something to tell you."

Gerald Romaine watched the little slim figure, until she reached the house; then, springing into the skiff and picking up the oars, with a few rapid strokes from his strong, muscular arms, he was soon shooting upstream again. He hardly took time to catch his breath until he sighted the island, and a few moments later reached it.

Springing out hurriedly he secured his boat, and dashed up the sands in search of Margaret.

That she was not where he had left her, it took him but a moment to discover.

He called loudly upon her name, but no voice answered him.

Had she learned that she had been left alone here, and, through terror, thrown herself into the water? No—no, Margaret was not a girl to commit suicide, no matter how great her fear had been.

How distressed Gerald was now, to think that he was the cause of all this trouble.

Just as he was about giving up the search, and sit down and try to think clearly what had best be done, he heard a low moan scarcely a rod's distance from him, and hurrying at once in the direction from whence it had proceeded, he saw Margaret slowly rising from her knees to her feet, and press her hands to her head in an uncertain way.

In an instant he was by her side.

“Margaret,” he cried, distressedly “what can I say to you?—censure me in your own heart—you must—that is all my fault—I am sorrier than words can tell. Oh, Margaret, can you ever forgive me for this?”

She stood quietly beside him, like a marble statue. “Tell me how it was that you happened to leave me here so long,” she said, “and where is Aurelia?” and the unnatural sound of her voice startled even herself.

“Come with me to the boat, Margaret,” he said, “and I will tell you, I will keep nothing back from you.”

“Tell me here and now, Gerald,” she said, “and I ask you again, where is Aurelia?”

He moved uneasily, and his eyes fell under her steady gaze.

Then it all came out—how he had taken Aurelia into the boat, to drift a little way with the tide, and the time flew by unheeded, until, glancing up, they found themselves opposite the farmhouse, where Aurelia had remained, and he had hurried back quickly after her. He added that he felt himself an arrant coward, and that no words—nothing could excuse what he had done.

“While you were with Aurelia you absolutely forgot me—is that it, Gerald?” she asked. “You must tell me the truth—you forgot my very existence—is it so?”

“It was so, Margaret,” he admitted, huskily.

She looked into his face, and it almost seemed to him that he could see her soul leave her body.

“I know,” she faltered, as she permitted him to place her in the boat—“I know what you are going to tell me next. I read it in your eyes. You have learned to love Aurelia, Gerald. Tell me all about it,” she said, huskily. “Be quick, that I may know the worst.”

“Listen to me, Margaret,” he said, “and believe me that I hate myself as I speak—that I would give the world, were it mine, to free myself from the odium, in your eyes, that must ever cling to me; you ask me for the truth, I cannot keep it back from you. Yes, it is my misfortune to love Aurelia.”

Margaret did not cry out, or utter any moan, though the sword had fallen and pierced her heart. The terrible calm of her face and the intentness of her gaze frightened her. He had read the story once of a young girl who had lost her reason because her lover grew cold, and

told her he loved her no longer. Was Margaret going mad? If she had said something, reproached him with bitter words, it would not have been so terrible to endure as this awful silence, broken only by the wash of the waves as the boat glided down the stream.

"Tell me about it," she said again; "keep nothing from me. Does Aurelia—my sister—love—you?"

"Yes," he said, and she saw his face flush and his eyes brighten. "I am sure she does."

He was ashamed to tell his story, yet something seemed to urge him on.

"Let me tell you, Margaret," he cried huskily, "all about it. From the time I asked you to be my wife, up to one short fortnight ago, I had every intention of being true to you; my heart was true to you, so were my thoughts. When I came home from New York I had no other plan in life, no other desire than to come home and marry you and settle down to quiet happiness. It is hard for a man to confess a weakness; I am ashamed to own mine. You remember the day I came home, how we crossed the clover fields together. I had no thought of treachery to you, but the moment my eyes rested on Aurelia's face I fell madly in love with her, and then, in that moment, I knew that I had never really loved you. The fierce, maddening love that thrilled through my heart in a single instant, as my eyes met Aurelia's, differed from my calm affection for you, as a seething torrent differs from a mountain brook. Do not think I yielded without a struggle; no man ever fought a harder fight with himself than I did to conquer that love, but it was useless. The more I saw her, the more I loved her. I was powerless to resist it. Now you know all, Margaret," he went on huskily, "and if you say that I must keep my promise and marry you, I will do so, but you will know that though I stood at the altar with you, my heart would be Aurelia's. I leave my fate in your hands."

"What is it that you expect me to do—to say, Gerald?" she asked, her face growing whiter and whiter still.

"Oh, Margaret, why do you make me say these cruel words?" he cried. "Why does not your own instinct tell you?"

"You wish me to give you back your freedom, is that it, Gerald? Let me hear the words from your lips."

"If you think best, Margaret," he murmured, burying his face in his hands, for he could not endure the steady calm of those eyes, that seemed burning into his very soul.

With a wild cry she flung herself face downward in the bottom of the boat.

"My God! My God!" he heard her cry.

He would fain have raised her and shielded the trembling figure in his arms. He did not love her, but he would have kissed the tears from her face. The sound of those terrible sobs pierced his heart with pain sharper than that of a two-edged sword.

"Do not touch me," she cried, as he bent over her, "do not touch me or I shall die!"

The most terrible moments of his life were those he spent in listening to the passionate weeping of the girl who loved him so well, and whose heart he was breaking.

The terrible sobs died away at last, and Gerald's own eyes were dim with tears. He almost felt like a murderer as he stood there, not daring to touch her, but as the passionate sobs grew fainter, he raised her and placed her on the seat beside him, and this time she did not resist.

"Margaret," he said gently, "I am so grieved! I had hoped you would not feel it so keenly."

With the greatest effort of her life she turned to him. "I can listen to you now again," she said. "You were asking me—what was it? Say it once more, that I may feel sure it is not some horrible dream from which I will awaken presently—— Ah, yes, I remember, *you*, the lover whom I have loved so well, whom I was so soon to call husband—you are asking me to give you up—because you have learned to love another. Listen, Gerald Romaine," she cried, rising slowly to her feet in the rocking boat. "Listen! Take my answer through life with you!"

CHAPTER IX.

FAIR OF FACE, AND FALSE OF HEART.

IN an instant Gerald Romaine had sprung forward and grasped the girl's hands.

"For the love of Heaven sit down, Margaret!" he cried hoarsely. He quite believed she intended to leap from the rocking boat into the dark, swirling river.

"You had better take time to think over the matter calmly, Margaret," he said, "and give me my answer to-morrow."

She turned her white, wistful face toward him, and Gerald Romaine was startled by it. Years could not have aged it more in passing over her than this one hour of anguish had done.

She held up her slender, white hand with a quick gesture.

"As well now as at any other time, Gerald," she said, in a very faint, quivering voice. "It is best to have it over with *now*. I—I could not endure a repetition of this—never again. You ask me to set you free, Gerald—to break for you the solemn pledge that binds you to me—forgetting that a betrothal vow is as solemn and binding in the sight of God as a marriage vow."

"I leave my fate in your hands, Margaret. If you say that I must keep my engagement and marry you, I will do so. Oh, it grieves me to speak the truth, but it must be told—we should never be happy, for my heart would be Aurelia's."

"May Heaven, in its mercy, spare me from ever marrying a man whose heart is another's," breathed Margaret, adding, faintly: "I—I—give you back your freedom, Gerald. From this hour our lives part forever."

But the "forever" which would part him from Margaret would give him Aurelia, and that thought shone plainly enough in his eyes.

"Oh, Margaret," he cried, gratefully, "how generous you are—how noble!" and he bent his fair, handsome head eagerly over the little white hands he held.

"You might have spared me that!" she said, in a low, intensive voice, drawing her hands haughtily from his clasp. "Do not let me see how pleased you are; it only

adds to the cruelty. Show some little regret—you might affect some little sorrow, even though you do not feel it.”

“Heaven knows that I am not quite so heartless as not to feel sorrow for what has occurred. Still, affairs like this are better to be adjusted *before* than *after* marriage.”

The boat touched the shore. He helped her out silently, and silently enough they wended their way together up the daisy-studded path that led to the house. Never did a man feel himself to be more miserable, contemptible—base. He despised himself for the part he had played, yet he was so completely under the spell of dark-eyed Aurelia that he could not resist the love that held him in thrall.

“Good-night, Margaret,” he said, as they reached the door—“good-night, and Heaven bless you. Tell me—that we are not to part in anger—could we not—be friends still?”

“I cannot promise that—I must take time to think it over,” she answered, turning quickly away.

She did not go to her own room just then. She felt that it would be beyond the power of her endurance to look upon the dark, sparkling face of the girl who had won her lover from her, until the great battle with herself was over and she felt calmer.

“I do not seem to realize that Gerald and I have parted—forever,” she sobbed to herself, her tears falling thick and fast. “It seems like some horrible dream, from which I will awaken presently, and that I shall fly to Gerald’s arms and tell him of it, and he will sooth me, and kiss away my tears. How could Heaven take him from me, when I love him so well!”

Suddenly the door just ahead of her was flung open, and Aurelia appeared.

“Oh, here you are at last, Margaret!” she exclaimed. “I thought you would never come. Did Gerald tell you how it happened; that we untied the boat and drifted off?” And two white arms were flung tightly about her neck, and a soft, dimpled, flushed cheek was laid against hers. “Oh, my! but wasn’t I terrified when I discovered we had drifted so far, Margy, and had left you away back on the island. Oh, how awfully pale you are, Margy;

but you haven't answered me. Did not Gerald tell you all about it?"

"Yes," said Margaret, very faintly, "he told me."

"I sat up and waited for you. I couldn't go to sleep until you came," yawned Aurelia. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"I think I know what it is—it is about Gerald," replied Margaret, more faintly still.

"Oh, bother Gerald!" cried the beauty, petulantly. "I do wonder, now, if he has been telling you of all the nonsense he was talking to me to-night? Oh, Margy, you ought to have been in the boat to have heard him—it was as good as a play in a theater; he was so awfully in earnest, poor fellow, that I had to keep my handkerchief stuffed in my mouth to keep from laughing outright."

"Aurelia!" cried Margaret, in a voice ringing with bitter pain, "tell me, do you love Gerald Romaine or not?"

Aurelia threw back her dark, curly head with a gay laugh.

"Gracious! how much in earnest you and Gerald are in everything you say and do. Do I love him? Why, Margy, anybody would think you were born yesterday to hear you talk like that. He's awfully nice to flirt with, you know, but goodness! he's not the style of a man for a girl like me to fall in *love* with by any means. If I ever do love a man he must be brilliant, polished, highly cultured—a man I could be proud of—a man whom all the world looked up to and the world of women wanted, and envied me for winning."

Margaret dropped on her knees beside Aurelia, and clasped her white hands.

"If you don't love Gerald, be kind to him in not leading him on, dear," she entreated, eagerly; "the bitterest pain that a human heart can know, is the pain of loving one whose love you can never, never win in return. Oh, Aurelia, spare him from that death in life. If he asks you for your love, tell him the truth."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," declared Aurelia, puckering her brows into the prettiest of frowns. "If I did, he would go away at once; then I would have no one to flirt with, no one to pick up my handkerchief,

follow me about and adore me, and life should be simply unendurable to me in this dull old farmhouse."

"Oh, Aurelia, do not lead him on to believe you love him if you do not," persisted Margaret. "It is a sin to win the heart of a good and noble man just to throw it away. It is awful to think that a dainty, delicate girl who would faint at the sight of a wound—who would not injure one hair on a man's head, would deliberately break his heart and blight his life to feed her own vanity. Do you think man can never feel nor suffer?"

Aurelia laughed, and the laughter that came from those crimson lips, though taunting, was as sweet as silver chiming bells.

"Your goody-goody notions quite overwhelm me, Margy," she cried; "any one to hear you talk would imagine that men were angels. Pretty angels they would make; they would break the heart of every girl they came across if they could. You must have noticed that for every heart-broken man, there are at least twenty heart-broken women. Now don't preach to me, Margy, that's a dear."

And the beauty buried her laughing face in the pillow, pressed her pink palms tightly over her ears, and was blissfully unconscious of all Margaret was saying; and in this way she dropped off to sleep, leaving Margaret still talking.

In another part of the house Gerald Romaine was tossing restlessly on his pillow trying to sleep, but sleep would not come to him; one thought seemed to haunt his brain and hold him from it. He was free now—free to win Aurelia if he could. He could hardly wait for to-morrow to come to see Aurelia and speak with her.

The hours rolled steadily on, and at last the pink flush in the eastern sky heralded the birth of a new day.

Gerald was up with the dawn, but it was late as usual when Aurelia made her appearance. He did not have an opportunity to exchange a word alone with her all the morning, and this fact nearly drove him distracted. The dark, laughing eyes that met him, invited him to linger near her, but at his approach, Aurelia invariably flitted away.

At length he found her alone in the garden, and in

an instant, like all impetuous lovers, he was at her side.

“Oh, Aurelia, have you purposely avoided me?” he cried. “You must have known that I was counting the hours until I could talk to you. Don’t try to break away from me, Aurelia, and do listen to me. You *shall* listen—you *must*.”

“Now, Gerald,” she cried, gayly, “what could be important enough for you to wear a sober face about—like that?”

He looked at her reproachfully. “Surely, you have not forgotten—have you, darling?” he whispered, tenderly. “You remember, dear, you promised to give me my answer to-day, whether you love me or not, and whether you will be my wife. You know how I adore you, precious. I love you so well that I cannot live without you.”

He was certainly blind that he could not see that it was not love which shone out of the laughing eyes into which he gazed so eagerly.

To Aurelia it was the wine of life, listening to the tale of love that every man who had ever known her had whispered in her ear. He put his arm about her gently and drew her toward him.

“Answer me, precious,” he whispered—“don’t you see how eagerly I am waiting for it?”

“Can’t I wait a week or a month more to think it over?” she pouted, giving him a swift, shy glance from those wondrous dark eyes.

“No—a thousand times, no! Suspense would kill me,” he declared. “My darling, tell me, will you be my wife?”

Down deep in her heart Aurelia was thinking that this playing at love would give a new zest to her life. Why not give him the promise he pleaded for so earnestly?—words were easily spoken.

“I suppose I must, if you want me so very much, Gerald,” she answered, coyly.

“When, my darling!” he cried, straining her rapturously to his heart.

“Oh, we won’t trouble our heads about that just yet,” she said, demurely.

CHAPTER X.

“LIFE WOULD NOT BE WORTH LIVING—WITHOUT YOUR LOVE.”

GERALD looked down into the lovely, dimpled face with a fond smile.

“We *must* settle the all-important question here and now, Aurelia,” he declared, with all a young lover’s impatience; “you have promised to be my wife; now you must tell me how long I will have to wait ere I can claim the treasure that I have won—will it be days or weeks?”

“It will be neither days nor weeks—it will be months, Gerald,” she declared, shaking her curly head decisively.

He caught her in his arms.

“Cruel Aurelia,” he cried, “you *surely* cannot mean that; why, one month will seem a year—how could I live through two or three of them, and be near you? I would get along best away from you until the time of probation was over.”

He would go away—that did not please Aurelia at all; a lover who is away from one is as good as no lover at all. True, there may be letters, but affection transmitted by pen and paper soon cools, unless the love-letters are of at least ten closely-written pages, and every line teems with ardent adoration.

The desire to be loved is strong enough in all of us—in Aurelia Lancaster it amounted to a mania; it is the key to all the foolish, wicked, senseless things you will find her doing through this history’s short course. If she could have had her will, every man, woman, and child would have bowed down in adoration before her—and in the summer time most girls like to have a lover. In the winter the fire is lover enough for any one. The frosty splendor of the stars provokes no yearning in any human soul toward any other; we peep at them through icy casements, then drop the curtain, shivering, and leave them alone to their high, cold play in the sky. But who can look at a July moon—alone?

No; the summer days at the old farmhouse would be

unendurable without some one to help her pass the time away.

“Aurelia,” he pleaded, “could you—would you marry me in three weeks’ time?”

“If you had said three months’ time I would have said ‘yes,’” she murmured, “either three or six months.”

“Then it shall be three months, my darling,” he cried, “three months from to-day. I shall live through that time somehow and then—oh, the joy, the delight of the anticipation of claiming you! You are my own now, Aurelia,” he cried rapturously. “Tell me that no one else shall ever make love to you, or kiss you; you will never be another’s?”

“Of course not,” replied Aurelia with delicious assurance.

“You will be true to me forever, dear?”

“Yes, I will be true forever,” declared Aurelia.

He caught her little hands in his, and covered them with burning kisses; his heart was too full for utterance. Of his love—passionate, reckless, fervent—there was no doubt; with Aurelia it was simply the love of gratified vanity, the desire to keep him at her side; she liked to see his face flush and pale under her words; she liked to see his head bowed in such utter humility before her; she liked to watch the light in his eyes grow tender or hard, as she willed it; she liked to see that he trembled at her frown; she found it inexpressibly sweet, as most girls do, to hold this power over her lover.

“Gerald,” she said, turning to him suddenly, “let no one know of our engagement, will you? Let us keep it a profound secret—even from Margaret—though she even guesses it.”

He was so much in love with Aurelia he was ready to promise anything.

He took her in his arms and looked wistfully in her face. True love always carries with it a certain fear. “You will not change your mind when you go back to the house and think it all over, darling; you will not regret your promise?” he asked earnestly.

She drew away from him, her lips pouting with pique.

“Have you no more faith in my promise than to ask that?” she said, reproachfully.

“Forgive me, dearest,” he cried; “believe me, I have a world of faith in you. I could sooner believe the angels up in heaven false and fickle than you, Aurelia. Forget that I asked the question.”

When they reached the house, Margaret was standing in the doorway. One look at Gerald’s happy face told her the truth, and her heart grew chill as death within her. She looked earnestly at Aurelia. Her sister’s laughing, dimpled face puzzled her; she saw triumph, not love, in the dark, saucy eyes that met and held her own.

Aurelia did not invite her confidence on the subject, as Margaret had believed she would do, and she forbore to ask her a single question concerning it.

To Margaret Lancaster the summer days that came and went after that were slow, torturing agony. Her strength deserted her; the color faded from her cheeks, the light from her eyes; but she kept up so bravely that no one noticed.

It was impossible for her not to watch Gerald and Aurelia as they sauntered amid the trees and flowers, her bright, lovely face and dark curls contrasting with his fair, proud, manly beauty.

Never was lover more devoted than Gerald to his *fiancee*. Margaret wondered vaguely that people who saw them together did not notice it. Even John Romaine and his wife did not dream of the existing state of affairs until the tragedy came and took them all un-awares.

In the long summer evenings Margaret would wander through the rose gardens alone, where once Gerald had been her companion—her lover. Often Gerald and Aurelia would pass so near the spot where she sat, shielded from view by the tall rose-bushes, that she could have put out her hand and touched them as they passed.

She was thankful that she was not seen by them, for as they neared her she could see that Gerald was worshipping the great beauty of the fair face so near his own. His arm would be encircling her waist, and often she saw him stoop down and kiss Aurelia’s lovely rose-bud lips,

and she so near them, crouching back amid the shadow of the bushes, lonely, desolate, and broken-hearted.

Was it just? she would cry out to the shining, silent heavens after they had passed. Was it right, because Aurelia had the brightness of the stars in her eyes, that she should take Gerald Romaine's love from her? Was it fair that Aurelia should stand within the circle of his arms, and she kneeling there forsaken?

Was it fair that Aurelia should receive his caresses and kisses while she stretched out her hands to empty air?

Aurelia had commenced this betrothal in jest—but Gerald was such an ardent, earnest wooer, she often found herself wavering as to whether she should really marry him—or not—when the three months were up.

It was Gerald's delight to wander through the grounds with Aurelia, and unfold to her his hopes and plans—how rich he would be if his patents only turned out well.

"Would you be *very* rich, Gerald?" she asked thoughtfully, one day.

"Beyond your greatest dreams," he declared enthusiastically.

"Then would you agree to anything that would make me happy?" she inquired, her lover taking new value in her eyes.

"Yes, my darling—anything—with all my heart and soul," he declared.

"Then you must get rich very quick and take me to Europe—to live in a castle," she said, "for I do not love this country life—I hate it. I should like grandeur, I have always longed for it."

"Do you crave grandeur very much, Aurelia?" he asked wistfully. "How strange it is, dear, that you have promised to marry a man who can give you none."

"But a man who can get it for me," she declared.

"If my patents amount to anything—yes—but suppose they should not?" he added thoughtfully.

She looked at him in alarm.

"Suppose they do not," she repeated with wide-open eyes. "They *must*, Gerald, for I would rather die than live a poor life like this."

"Are you not happy here?" he asked, "surrounded by the kindest of friends, the sweetest of sisters, and the

most devoted of lovers? It seems to me, Aurelia, that you have all the elements of happiness."

"I would sooner die," she declared again, "than spend all my life here; I could not endure the dreariness."

"I should be here—it would be spent with me, Aurelia—with me as your husband, dear."

His face glowed; the rapture of content came over it, but there was no response in hers.

"I should very much like to know," continued Aurelia, "if it would be fair to place me, who have such a keen, passionate longing for life, gayety, pleasure, here where I have none of the three."

"None of the three?" he repeated sadly, and the pain in his voice touched her; she looked at him; his face had grown very pale, and there was a cloud in his clear, loving eyes.

He knelt down in front of her where he could see her face, and he drew it gently down to his own.

"Not happy here, Aurelia?" he murmured; "why, my darling, I find heaven wherever *you* are; I will not believe you meant to wound me so. You ought to reign in a castle because you are so beautiful, so brilliant, and you shall, for I will have one for you."

"When?" she asked, bringing his castle in the air suddenly to the ground.

"Soon, my darling. You do not know how hard I am working—as soon as I can possibly accomplish it."

"Work!" replied the red lips, scornfully—"a man may work for a lifetime and die poor. Look at your father, how hard he works, and he has only made enough all his life long to buy a miserable farm."

Gerald's face flushed and paled.

"But my work is very different from his, Aurelia," he said, gravely. "Brains win gold. There have been men who have gotten up simple patents who have realized millions of money from them."

"And there have been men working at patents who have wasted their lives on them, and starved in a garret, I once heard Madame Hulburton say at school," she declared.

"But I have not that intention," cried Gerald, with sudden power. "I *will* win wealth for you, since you crave it so much, my darling. The thought of you will

give me skill, nerve and courage. Have patience with me a little while, precious."

After a moment's pause, he said: "I should like to take you in my arms and run away with you to some lonely island or solitary desert, where you would have no one but me to look to for happiness—a foolish thought to express—but even the gravest men will have foolish, boyish fancies sometimes. Oh, Aurelia, if I could but tell you how I love you," he murmured—"if but for once I could measure the height and depth of my own wild worship, you would be compelled in sheerest pity to love me more in return than you do."

"You seem to think that I do not love you very much *now*, Gerald?" she said.

"There are times when I almost doubt it," he replied, sadly, "and the bare idea of such a possibility drives me mad. Your love is more to me than my life, Aurelia."

CHAPTER XI.

WHATEVER IS TO BE, WILL BE.

It seemed strange to Margaret that John Romaine and his wife did not notice Gerald's great, absorbing love for Aurelia. How blind they were not to see it in Gerald's every action, in the light that shone in his eyes as they rested on Aurelia, in the very tone of his voice, which changed to such tenderness whenever he spoke to her.

There was one thing that almost drove Margaret distracted, and that was Mrs. Romaine's constant recurrence to her approaching marriage with her son. These remarks were dagger thrusts in the girl's heart. How was she to endure them, and live through it?

"It is strange that you don't commence to make your preparations for the wedding, my dear," declared Mrs. Romaine one day to her; "other girls busy themselves with their wedding finery months and months before the great event. You and Gerald must have a send-off that the people around here won't soon forget. Have you settled on the day yet?"

Margaret went up to Mrs. Romaine and knelt down

beside her chair, lifting her fair, pale face pathetically to the kindly one beside her.

“You have never questioned my judgment when I decided upon any course I wished to pursue, Aunt Rachel,” she said huskily, “and I am sure you will not when I tell you that which I have come to say to you now. It is simply this: Gerald and I are not to be—married, our—our engagement is—broken off!”

“What!” cried Mrs. Romaine shrilly, staring at her in open-eyed amazement through her spectacles, quite believing she had not heard aright; “what was it you said, Margaret?”

The girl repeated her words huskily, but firmly.

“Why, I can scarcely believe what I hear you say, my dear,” she declared; asking, anxiously: “Have you and Gerald had any little lovers’ quarrel, child?—tell me if you have. The best of us get cross with those we love most sometimes; but there is such a thing as making it up, and setting matters all straight again,” and she took Margaret’s fair face between her hands, and looked down into the clear, sweet, blue eyes searchingly, intently.

“Gerald and I have not quarreled, Aunt Rachel; we had a quiet talk one day, and we both came to the conclusion that we were better apart—we both agreed to break our engagement.”

Mrs. Romaine was bitterly disappointed.

“It was the hope of my old age, Margaret,” she said; adding, thoughtfully, as she wiped her glasses with the corner of her apron: “Then you did not love each other, after all?”

The girl kept down with an iron will all emotion.

“Yes,” she replied, with a quiet smile, “but it was not in the right kind of way. We are the best of friends. I—I am like a sister to Gerald, but of lovers’ love there is none.”

“It seems strange that you never found it out before,” said Mrs. Romaine, musingly; “why, I felt so sure that you loved my Gerald—and that he loved you.”

She loved the girl kneeling down by her side so well that she could detect the suppressed pain in her voice, and she did not feel satisfied with the explanation Margaret had given her. Why could they not have loved each other and been happily married? Still she did not

like to say any more, and Margaret was thankful for her silence.

She made up her mind to talk to Gerald about it that very night; and if it was as she suspected—that some foolish lovers' quarrel was drifting them apart—she would take it upon herself to bring affairs to a happy reconciliation, and that speedily.

Mrs. Romaine looked very keenly at her tall, handsome son when he entered the house that night—she could not see that he looked cast down in the least—his eyes were brighter than she had ever noticed them to be before—there was a smile of perfect contentment on his lips, and his laugh rang out hearty and clear.

Mrs. Romaine was certainly puzzled.

She followed him to his usual retreat—the orchard—whither he had gone to smoke his cigar that night.

“Gerald,” she said breaking into the subject uppermost in her mind at once; “I want to know what the difficulty is between Margaret and you?”

“There is ‘no difficulty between us,’ as you phrase it, mother,” he declared, with a merry laugh that grated harshly upon her.

“This is sad news she has given me, my son,” she answered, gravely; “she tells me her engagement with you is broken off; is it true, Gerald?”

“Did you ever know of Margaret lending herself to an untruth?” he inquired, quizzically, adding: “Yes, it is quite true, mother; she has the good sense to see that our love for each other was not the kind of love that makes a happy marriage, and was brave enough to break the bonds which bound her to me.”

“And you, Gerald, what did you think?” she inquired anxiously.

He flushed to the roots of his brown, curling hair. He could not throw the blame upon Margaret.

“It is a mutual agreement, mother,” he said; “that knowledge must content you.”

Mrs. Romaine did not feel satisfied with her interview with Gerald. She felt a vague, shadowy doubt that there was something about this affair which she had not yet discovered—there was something wrong somewhere, and she determined to set her woman's wits to work to find out just where the blame lay.

Then she discovered what she should have noticed long ago, and that was Gerald's apparent infatuation for Aurelia, and the discovery brought with it the keenest alarm, not only on account of the jealousy which must lie deep in Margaret's heart—if she had felt so deeply wounded by it as to break the engagement that bound her to Gerald—but her thoughts went back to a time and scene which, with the years that had come and gone, she had almost forgotten.

Like a flash Mrs. Romaine's mind reverted to that beautiful stranger who had come to the inn on that memorable night of the terrible storm, nearly seventeen years ago, and who had died in her arms, leaving to her care the two little orphan children—Aurelia and Margaret; and with that thought came the remembrance of the startling words the dying young mother had uttered as she clasped the infant Aurelia to her breast in a mad frenzy, crying out:

“Hark you, listen well to what I have to say, and those on the confines of the tomb speak but the truth. *This babe must never love, nor must she marry!* The bitter fate of the daughters of the house of Lancaster hangs over her—the curse will follow her down to her grave.”

What that curse was, it will be remembered, had not been unfolded to Mrs. Romaine. The secret which had trembled on the lips of the hapless young mother had died with her. Through all these years the memory of that scene rushed back to her mind with a terrible shock.

What if Gerald had transferred his love from Margaret to Aurelia, and had intentions of marrying the latter, over whose head some horrible, bitter, unknown curse hung? Mrs. Romaine trembled and grew pale at the bare thought.

How could she dare warn Gerald by telling him all, when she had taken such a solemn oath at that dying bedside, before God and the recording angels, to never breathe one word that fell from those death-cold lips?

She had kept her oath well; not even to John, her faithful husband, had she ever revealed the slightest hint of what happened on that awful, never-to-be-forgotten night.

Now she was face to face with the consequences of binding herself by that solemn, fatal vow to eternal silence.

Mrs. Romaine wrung her hands together in an agony of grief at the thought of Gerald's heart going out to Aurelia. Surely, God *must* prevent such a catastrophe, she cried out to herself.

Suddenly, like an inspiration, a thought occurred to her. A wealthy lady, whose life John Romaine had saved while driving in that vicinity, the previous summer, had been very solicitous that Margaret, who had attended her during the fortnight she had been laid up at the farmhouse with a sprained ankle, should visit her at her country home the following summer.

Only that day they had received a letter reminding Margaret of that promise, but the timid girl shrunk from going among strangers. Why not send Aurelia there?

The idea seemed a sort of inspiration to Mrs. Romaine. That plan would take the fascinating little beauty out of her son's way. The cause of Margaret's jealousy would be removed—he would, man-like, soon forget his infatuation for a pretty face, and in due course of time return to his allegiance to Margaret; and when they had made up their differences, she would see to it that their marriage took place as speedily as possible—yes, Margaret should be Gerald's wife ere Aurelia returned.

It was a very ingenious plan, and Mrs. Romaine flattered herself upon her clever diplomacy in arranging such a scheme. It was well for the poor lady that she did not foresee the result—no warning came to her that it would end in the darkest tragedy that was ever inscribed in the country's dark history of crime. But—

“Whatever is to be, will be,
Fate leads us with a single thread.”

That Aurelia would be delighted at the prospect of visiting the wealthy Mrs. Clavering at her magnificent country seat at Deephurst, she knew the girl's nature well enough to readily believe.

Mrs. Romaine meant to broach the subject in a round-about way to Aurelia that very night; she felt pretty cer-

tain that the girl would clasp her little hands together excitedly, and cry out, "Oh, Aunt Rachel! if Margaret is so foolish as to persist in refusing to visit this wealthy lady, who is anxious to have her come, why not let me go in her place?" She meant to demur at first, to make Aurelia the more anxious, but end by sending her off with all possible haste.

How little Mrs. Romaine dreamed that this decision changed the current of three lives, and that it would have been better for her son Gerald if Aurelia had died ere she went to her strange fate at Deephurst.

CHAPTER XII.

"I WISH YOU LOVED ME LESS."

MRS. ROMAINE was glad that Gerald was not at the tea-table that night, for it gave her a better opportunity for broaching the subject uppermost in her mind to the two girls who sat opposite her. She had looked at them keenly as they took their places, and never until now did the great contrast in these two sisters strike her so forcibly.

How plain Margaret looked, in her brown stuff gown, simply made, with the bit of ruching at her neck and wrists, and her fair, curling hair brushed simply back and twisted in a loose coil at the back of her shapely head! Somehow, in comparing the two, one unconsciously likened Margaret to a little brown linnet; and her sister, Aurelia—with her dark, glorious, dimpled face and wine-dark eyes, with the embellishments of the soft white mull dress, with its crimson, fluttering ribbons—to a gloriously beautiful bird of paradise.

Very cautiously Mrs. Romaine began the topic, with Margaret's invitation to visit the Claverings, and she reddened all over her honest face when she thought of how much depended on the result of this conversation. She started cautiously to feel her way; she must not show her intentions too soon. She always thought afterward that her method had been a masterpiece of diplomacy.

She described the beautiful Clavering estate at Deep-

hurst, and how lonely it was for the lady living there, with only her ward, her servants, and her handsome young son—and how much there would be to enjoy, if Margaret would only accept Mrs. Clavering's invitation to spend the summer there.

Aurelia listened, with wide-open eyes—every moment they grew larger and rounder with interest.

“Aunt Romaine!” she cried, at length, “if Margaret doesn't wish to go, why couldn't I go in her place? Surely it might be arranged in that way, I should think!”

At first Mrs. Romaine demurred loudly, and protested that such an arrangement was not to be thought of. Margaret was the one to go and enjoy herself, if anybody went. But, in the end, Aurelia was allowed to have her own way, and it was settled that a telegram should be sent to Deephurst that very night, acquainting Mrs. Clavering of her expected arrival, and that Aurelia should follow the telegram on the morrow.

While they were busy packing her trunks, Aurelia strayed out into the orchard; she knew Gerald would pass that way on his return from the village; she meant to intercept him there, and tell him she was going to leave the farm for a few weeks' visit at Deephurst. She expected there would be quite a scene. Gerald would beg her, with tears in his eyes, to forego her intention; but no matter what he said or did, she intended to go—nothing should change that.

Aurelia wandered up and down the rose-bordered path, in the moonlight, with her thoughts all in a maze, her head whirling with the anticipation of the grand life in store for her. How she would hate to come back to the plain old farm after seeing all that grandeur! she could not bear to even contemplate it. So, a little later, when Gerald came—hurrying more quickly than was his wont over the fields, longing to see Aurelia, after a separation of a whole day that seemed to him the length of a year—she met him with great coldness.

How pitiful it was to see his face droop and sadden, his lips tremble, and his eyes grow dim with suppressed tears! It was the first time she had ever been cold to him—the first time her face had not brightened for him.

She did not even smile when he hastened up to her, and bending down, kissed her beautiful face.

“My darling,” he cried, “I thought the day would never come to an end. I have been longing to see you. Do you know, Aurelia,” he went on eagerly, “I have never once left you without a deadly sense of fear coming over me that something might happen to take you from me while I was gone. If you knew all my tortures when I am away from you, you would pity me.”

“What nonsensical fancies you have, Gerald!” she said, impatiently.

“It is because I love you so much,” he replied, sadly. “I love you too much, my darling. Do you know what would happen to me if you ever threw me over?”

“No,” she replied, looking carelessly into the earnest face before her, not relishing the turn the conversation was taking.

“I should die—or go mad!” he declared, bending over her and kissing her again, with the passion of his great, wistful, earnest love in his blue eyes.

She drew back with a frown.

“I never said you might kiss me every day, Gerald,” she said.

“I know, my darling,” he said, humbly; “but I cannot help it. It has grown into a custom now.”

“When anything has become a custom, it ceases to be a charm,” she replied, adding, tartly: “I wish you wouldn’t tease me with your kisses—I do, indeed.”

He looked into her face with wondering eyes, and so wistfully that if she had had any heart it must have been touched.

“Aurelia,” he said, slowly, drawing nearer to her, and putting back the pale, white roses that nodded to and fro in the night wind, tossing their white, loosened petals over her dark, curly head, “Aurelia, have I been so unfortunate as to displease you in any way?”

“No,” she replied, drawing back from the strong arm that stole about her slender waist; “I do not remember that you have.”

“You are so changed, dearest,” he said huskily, “that I can hardly imagine that this is you! I can hardly tell—I dare not say even to myself—what your manner seems to me, Aurelia!” he cried, with a sudden

catching of the breath. "You cannot surely repent having promised to marry me—it cannot be that."

She laughed a low, impatient laugh; though heartless as she was, the pain in his deep voice touched her. She looked at him; his face had grown very white, and there was a cloud in his clear, blue eyes.

"I wish you wouldn't take it to heart so much, if I am a little cross once in awhile," she said poutingly, toying uneasily with the crimson, fluttering ribbons of her dress, and keeping him off at arm's-length from her.

"Why be cross with me, dearest?" he asked sadly. "You know that your smile makes heaven to me—your frown despair. I would give all I have on earth to save you from one cross, unhappy moment."

She did not even hear him; she was thinking of other things.

"Will it surprise you to know that I came down to the orchard on purpose to meet you, Gerald?" she said, suddenly, looking up at him sweetly.

The poor fellow looked delighted; the shadows left his eyes at once.

"Did you, darling?" he cried. "Then you did long for my coming after all?"

And his fair, handsome face was all sunshine again.

"I wanted to see you, because I have something very important to tell you, Gerald," she said, sweetly. "You may sit down beside me, if you promise to listen and not interrupt me."

He would have promised her anything for the sake of sitting down beside her and having her all to himself out there in the sweet, white moonlight.

But Gerald's dismay, when he heard that she was going to leave the farm and visit two months at Deephurst, could never be described.

In vain he attempted to dissuade her; the more he said about it the more determined the perverse little beauty was to go.

They fell out over it, but Aurelia did not care in the least.

"You do not love me," Gerald cried, "or you could not leave me."

And she replied that he might think whatever he

liked; but this way of thinking made her lover miserable, she well knew.

For quite half an hour they sat there side by side, she studying the moon—but taking sidelong glances at Gerald's face—he intently scanning the long, green grasses at his feet, yet seeing nothing.

“I shall count the days until you return, Aurelia,” he said huskily, at length breaking the irksome silence.

“Perhaps I shall see some one I like better than you, and never come back at all,” she retorted maliciously, to pay him back for that fit of sulks.

“Hush!” he cried, with a shudder, putting up his hand before her mouth. “Don't say that, darling. It strikes terror to my heart, it is so horribly probable. I cannot bear it.”

“I wish you were not so fond of me,” she said, in a low voice.

“I could have given you up at first if you had told me it must be so positively; but not now, my darling, not now.”

He had seized her hands and held them in so firm a grasp that the rings she wore hurt her slim, white fingers.

“Tell me about these Claverings, Aurelia,” he said. “You know I have never met them; I was away when Mrs. Clavering was at the farm. Tell me all about these people, my darling.”

“They are very wealthy, and have a grand old place, your mother says. There is a young girl there of about my age—a ward of Mr. Clavering—and also a son.”

“A son!” repeated Gerald, with a start, his voice sounding husky.

“Well, why should there not be a son? What harm is there in that?” asked Aurelia, irritably.

“I wish these people had not a son.”

“Do you imagine, by some revolution in the wheel of fate, that they might have been induced to leave you their money if they had not?” she said laughing.

“No, not that,” he replied, with a faint attempt at an answering smile, against his will; “but, darling, you'll promise to write to me and tell me what he is like?”

“Yes,” she agreed.

“And about how old he is, and if he is—plain—or—or good-looking?”

“Yes.”

“Whether you see much of him, precious?”

“Yes.”

“What he says to you, and if you find him an agreeable companion; and, oh, darling, always remember, while you are talking to him, that you are *my* wife that is to be——”

“Gerald,” she cried angrily, “I believe you are jealous, and of a person I have never seen. Can it be possible you are so supremely ridiculous?”

“I *am* jealous, I admit it frankly,” he answered, reddening. “I cannot help it. I shall always be jealous until you are really mine, past stealing or taking back again; after that I never shall. Will you write to me every day, precious?” he added eagerly. “You cannot think how much pleasure your letters will be to me. I will live upon them.”

“I couldn’t promise to write every day,” declared Aurelia; “if there’s one thing in this world that I do detest above all others, it’s writing letters.”

“Then promise me that you will write every other day, dear,” he urged.

CHAPTER XIII.

“I COULD NOT SAY GOOD-BYE TO YOU BEFORE STRANGERS!”

“Do you want me to give you a promise just for the sake of giving it, and knowing well enough at the time that I never—never could keep such an agreement?” Aurelia asked laughingly.

“Heaven forbid!” answered Gerald; “but it seems to me it would not be so very much of a task to write a very few words to me at least every other day, dear. Then I would feel sure your heart was still warm toward me. You would be thinking of me while you wrote the letters, at least.”

“One gets tired of the same subject—it grows monotonous. I couldn’t find anything to say to you, I feel sure, after the first letter. I shall have said it all in

that!" she declared, with a peal of laughter that startled the birds from their nests in the old apple-tree over their heads. "No doubt you would like me to tell you in every letter—and fill up all the four pages—with statements that I still love you, and am so wholly your own that I do not so much as look at any one else; and if a young man comes my way, I shut my eyes, that I won't see him, and shut my ears, that I won't hear the sound of his voice! Would that please you, Gerald Romaine?"

Her levity grieved him inexpressibly.

"I suppose you cannot help talking nonsense, Gerald," she went on. "I am not sentimental myself, and so much of it wearies me. When you talk about anything else I shall be glad."

"When do you go, dearest?" he asked presently.

"To-morrow morning at eight," she answered.

"Will you let me drive over to the station with you alone?" he asked, wistfully.

"Your father and Margaret are going with me," she replied. "You come too, if you like."

He drew back.

"I could not say good-bye to you before strangers, dear," he said, huskily. "I would prefer saying good-bye to you to-night, here and now, with only the sleeping flowers and trees to witness the pain of our parting."

He did not know that she was wishing from the very depths of her heart that it was well over with.

"Aurelia, say that you will miss me, and will long for my presence sometimes when you are away!" he cried, covering her hands with hot, burning kisses.

"I am sure I shall," she said.

"My darling, think ever and always of me; be kind to me, love me; promise me that you will be true to me always while you live---true to me in thought, word, and deed. Raise your beautiful face and promise me, Aurelia."

"I promise," she repeated, "to be true to you, Gerald, while I live."

Then there was silence between them, deep silence, but for the wind sighing among the trees overhead.

The words rose to the high heavens, and the listening angels heard and recorded them.

Slowly, and with infinite tenderness, Gerald took her in his arms and kissed her, as though death itself should never take her from him.

“Say one word to me, Aurelia,” he whispered, “one word, that I may think of you when you are gone, for my heart is broken.”

“Dear Gerald!” she murmured, and she was nearer loving him at that moment than at any other time in her life.

“Oh! my darling, how can I let you leave me?” he cried; “you love me now, but will you come back the same to me? It is like tearing my heart out of my bosom letting you go away.”

“Two months will quickly pass, then I will be back,” she said.

He seemed to leave his very heart and soul in the kiss that he pressed on her lips.

Then his arms fell from her, and with the whispered word—good-bye—he turned and walked hurriedly away while he had the strength to leave her, and Aurelia wended her way back to the farmhouse alone.

Mrs. Romaine and Margaret were still busy packing her trunk, and in the keen feminine delight of watching the pretty furbelows—being folded and laid away—within twenty minutes Aurelia had quite forgotten the fair, handsome lover, pacing up and down under the apple-trees, and wearing his very heart out over the agony of this coming separation from her.

“How pretty I shall look in those lovely cream mulls,” declared Aurelia, excitedly, as she bent her dimpled chin on her pink palms, and watched the operation of their being carefully folded by Margaret’s deft fingers, and laid neatly in the trunk. “I wonder if Mr. Clavering’s ward is pretty and stylish.”

“Very probably,” returned Margaret. “I heard Mrs. Clavering say she had spent most of her life at Vassar.”

“Did she tell you the girl’s name?” asked Aurelia curiously.

“Maud—Maud Erskine, I think,” returned Margaret.

“The name is pretty, at all events,” declared Aurelia.

“And how about the son?” she asked, after a little pause,

“Mrs. Clavering never spoke much about her son Randolph,” said Margaret. “It may be only my fancy, but she always seemed to avoid the subject, I thought; but by two or three remarks of Mrs. Clavering’s, I was under the impression that it was the dearest hope of the mother that her son should marry Miss Erskine—in fact, that this arrangement was made for him, when he was a child, by their respective parents.”

“And, of course, Mr. Randolph Clavering certainly rebels,” cried Aurelia, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. “Of course, no man likes being badgered about a girl, from the time he was in knee-breeches and pinafores. They always hate girls most cordially who are picked out for them in that way, Margy, depend upon it.”

“I do not think so—at least I understand Mr. Clavering, junior, thinks the match a suitable one. Why should he not like her? She has youth and—and—beauty,” sighed Margaret.

She quite believed a beautiful face must carry the hearts of men by storm, as Aurelia’s had carried Gerald’s.

“And no doubt, she has wealth,” returned Aurelia, frowning. “That is the *last* attribute you ever think of, Margaret, and it should be *first*.”

“Yes, she has money. I remember Mrs. Clavering mentioning that,” said Margaret.

But she added:

“Money would be of no consequence to the Claverings; they are so rich themselves.”

“Don’t you wish you and I were rich, Margy?” said Aurelia, in a low voice. “Do you never long for it?”

“No,” said Margaret, turning her honest blue eyes on her beautiful sister. “I have never once thought of it. I—I should rather be—happy—than—rich.”

Aurelia laughed aloud.

The hidden secret in the girl’s heart, which those words betrayed, did not strike her.

“I would give the whole world to be rich, Margy,” she cried; “to live in grandeur, to live in a fine house, and have magnificent equipages, with high-stepping horses, in glittering harness and silver chains; to have women envy me as I passed by, and men admire me.

That would be something worth living for. The rich quaff the wine of life; the poor do not even imagine, in their wildest dreams, what it is like."

Margaret looked at her sister in open-eyed wonder.

"No good ever comes from longing so ardently for that which we have not and never will have, Aurelia," said Margaret, gravely; "we are poor girls, and must be satisfied with our lot, believing that God knew best for us, and where to place us for our good."

"Speak for yourself!" cried Aurelia, angrily. "If you haven't a wish or a thought above your head, why, that's no reason I shouldn't have. You could be happy if you were as poor as a church-mouse, I suppose. I seem to have absorbed all the ambition of both of us when we were born. How strange it is that we are twin sisters, Margaret?" she said, after a moment's pause. "Twins usually resemble each other closely; while no two persons in the whole wide world are more unlike than you and I, in face, form, feature, disposition—everything."

Margaret came and knelt by Aurelia's side.

"I would give the whole wide world, dear, if God had given me a face like yours—just like yours, dear," she sobbed; and in her voice there was bitter pain.

Aurelia was vain enough to feel flattered.

"Oh, you look very well as you are, Margaret," she declared. "Of course every one cannot expect to be beautiful; you are plain, but there have been times when your face lighted up and your cheeks flushed until you looked quite pretty—you did, indeed."

Margaret sighed and smiled sadly.

There was much surprise at the farmhouse when Gerald did not come to the carriage to bid Aurelia farewell.

He was nowhere to be found; but Aurelia soon smoothed matters over by declaring she had bidden him good-bye only a short while before.

"Now, there'll be a conveyance o' some kind to meet you at Deephurst station, my lass," said Farmer Romaine, putting down Aurelia's innumerable boxes and packages on the car seat beside her. "Now take care o' yersel', lass, about changin' cars at Dover. I allus claimed that women couldn't travel alone, an' I shall be oneasy-like until we hear that you've got there all right,

safe and sound. Don't speak to nobody on the train on no account, lass. Keep yer veil down. I allow ye'll not famish afore you get there, for in this bundle there's a spring chicken, and some o' Rachel's fine bread, some ham, and Margy's doughnuts—just the way ye ullus tease for to have 'em—nice and brown, two big apples, and a slice o' citron cake, and no end o' good things, besides the——”

The rest of the sentence was lost amid the shrill screeching of the engine, much to Aurelia's satisfaction.

“How little he dreams,” she thought, with a little, suppressed laugh, “that, as soon as the train leaves the curve, I shall pitch all these old doughnuts and apples and the rest out of the window with the greatest complaisance! Eat from a paper box—before all the people on the train, indeed!”

The very thought made Aurelia's proud, sensitive soul shiver.

She had long since made up her mind that she should have a first-class dinner on the train, with a little table in front of her, silver service and colored waiters to wait on her for *once*, if it took every cent of the five-dollar bill Uncle John had stowed away in her purse—“a guard against accidents.”

“Good-bye, lass,” cried Farmer Romaine, giving her a hearty smack full on her rosebud lips. “The train's startin', I'll hev to leave ye, Aurelia,” and the next moment, to her great relief, the wieldly, good-natured old farmer had, with much difficulty, made his way out of the car.

CHAPTER XIV.

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE.

FARMER ROMAINE and Margaret, leaning eagerly out from the old carry-all, watched the lovely face at the car window until the train carried it out of their sight, and neither of them thought of the dark days that were to come ere they should behold the beautiful face of Aurelia Lancaster again.

The sun climbed higher and higher in the blue

heavens as the day wore on, and meanwhile onward rushed the train through the sunlit hills and dales.

Aurelia grows heartily tired after awhile of staring out of the window through her veil, lifts it at length, despite admonitions, and stares around in unconscious school-girl fashion at her fellow-passengers, ruminating on how funny it was that so many people had some particular place to go, and on that particular day too.

She is tired of watching the woman with the blinking, fat baby, in the seat in front of her; the owl-like minister opposite her, who never takes his spectacled eyes off the tracts he is reading—she knows he is a minister from the cut of his coat—and the two young girls simpering and giggling to a very homely young man just ahead, and she falls to speculating which girl he is most interested in, as he never betrays himself into looking or speaking too much to the one or to the other.

She turns her curly head, bird-like, to take a glance at the people sitting back of her. Ah, unlucky action! in that first sweeping glance, her eyes encounter the fixed, penetrating stare of a young man sitting on the opposite side of the aisle, a little way back, watching her intently.

She blushed and turned quickly away, but not until she had taken mental note that he was an exceedingly handsome young man.

“How eagerly he looked at me, as though he quite admired me,” thought Aurelia, with a little thrill at her heart.

A few minutes later she saw him approach the door of the car, look out for a moment, then turn slowly and walk back, looking deliberately at her every step of the way, and there was no mistaking the bold, keen gaze of admiration he bent on her.

Aurelia took another little shy glance at him, just after he had passed.

In her opinion he was certainly handsome; his trousers, a broad plaid, were cut in the very latest style; so was the “nobby” cutaway coat; on his immaculate shirt front two immense diamond studs flashed, and these were surmounted by a tie of flaming crimson; an immense ring with a big white gleaming stone sparkled on his hand, and he took every precaution of displaying it

as he passed Aurelia, by twirling the ends of his thick blonde mustache, or running his white fingers through light, bushy hair, and tilting back his hat. He drew out of his pocket an immense yellow watch too, attached to a thick fob chain, with no end of charms and seals that jingled not inharmoniously as he stopped, and consulted his watch, as he passed Aurelia.

Even a most unsophisticated person must have observed that his dress was decidedly "loud," but such an idea never once occurred to Aurelia; to her, the stranger appeared handsome and stylish.

While she was pondering over, idly, who he was, the young man suddenly appeared before her again, this time stopping directly by her side.

"I am sorry to have been so unfortunate as to lose my seat," he said; "ladies came in and appropriated it without so much as saying by your leave, don't you know. This half of your seat is the only one vacant on the car; may I take it beside you?" he murmured, raising his hat, and bowing low with an irresistible smile, and a fervent look from his keen, blue, bold eyes.

Aurelia assented with a bow, making room for him.

He settled back in his seat, and the next moment had apparently forgotten all about her—which certainly piqued Aurelia.

She did not know that he had said to himself he was too wary to commence conversation *at once* with her before the other passengers.

Very diplomatically he brought about the opportunity of addressing her. Should he lower the shade for her? The sun was very warm; and a little later on: Could he bring her ice-water?—the car was actually suffocating that close, sultry afternoon.

The handsome stranger made himself so agreeable that Aurelia's vanity was flattered.

"Where was the harm," she told herself, "of flirting with so pleasant a young man to beguile so long and tedious a journey? Of course Margaret and the people at the farm would be horror-stricken over it if they knew—but how were they ever to know?"

And she crushed back a gay little laugh from her saucy cherry-ripe lips.

She did not demur when he insisted upon supplying

her with railway literature and the choicest of fruits; and when he chatted to her, gayly, in that fascinating low voice of his, Aurelia would look up at him coyly, without a rebuke in her splendid dark eyes, and blush and smile.

Two gentlemen, seated a little way back, had been interested spectators of this little scene.

One had watched with considerable amusement in his keen gray eyes—his friend looked on with deep disgust.

"I have always held," said the latter, grimly turning to his merry friend, "that true modesty and decorum in American girls of the present age—when away from the leading-strings of duennas—is about as rare as pearls in oysters. There you have a fine illustration of it."

"A sweeping declaration—and altogether wrong," replied his companion. "You are too hard on the sex, my dear fellow. That pretty girl yonder, is very imprudent, I admit, but she is very young—scarcely more than seventeen, I should imagine. She is up to the times, enjoys a harmless little flirtation, and that is all there is to it."

"Of course you know the character of that man," returned the other; "why, it's enough to blast a woman's reputation for life—exchanging a word with him; upon my word, I have half a mind to follow that girl to the end of her destination, to see that no harm befalls her."

At this his companion laughed long and loud.

"Great Heaven! *you* a confirmed woman-hater, smitten by a girl's bright eyes, at first sight!—well, well! what will happen next in this world of wonders? I can hardly believe I have heard aright."

"You are decidedly wrong in the conclusion that you have jumped at," returned his friend, impatiently, the frown deepening on his fine dark face. "If I should ever fall in love with a woman, I should want to make her my wife—for a nature like mine never truly loves but once. And do you think I am a man to give my heart in the keeping of a flirt—a soulless coquette? The woman who flirts before marriage, will not be averse to a little of the same thing after marriage, I assure you—no such woman for me; I steer clear of all such reefs.

The thought of following her to the end of her destination is purely, as I have stated, to save an innocent, foolish girl from the toils of the worst rascal that the slums of New York ever produced, and that ever cheated Sing Sing of an inmate."

"You will have plenty of time to make up your mind as to this wild, chivalrous scheme before we get to Dover. I believe you were to change cars there?"

"Yes," replied his friend, shortly.

Then for some distance they traveled on in silence.

"Look!" cried the gentleman with the good-humored face, in a low voice, as he touched his companion on the arm, "here we are at Dover, and I see that the pair who have interested you so much are about to get off here."

As the two gentlemen passed Aurelia and her companion, they could not help overhearing a fragment of their conversation.

"I am delighted that I can be of service to you," the bold stranger was saying to Aurelia, as he possessed himself of her hand-sachel and shawl. "It would have been very uncomfortable for a young lady to make this change of cars unassisted. You go to Deephurst, you say?"

The girl nodded, and he continued:

"That is on the other road. The depot is quite a mile from here; you will have to take a cab. I will see you over to the other depot with the greatest of pleasure. I see we shall have no trouble in getting a cab—there are plenty about. I am known hereabouts; there is one cab in particular I must get."

"There! didn't I tell you that scoundrel was bent upon villainy?" exclaimed the dark-complexioned man with suppressed rage, under his breath, to his friend. "Did you hear the infamous lie he told the girl about the depot for Deephurst being up the road, and that he would take her there in a cab? If he succeeded in driving off in a cab with her, in all probability the world would never hear of that foolish girl again."

At this moment the crush of the throng was so great, the two gentlemen were completely separated from the object of their solicitude. And by the time they caught sight of Aurelia again, she was seated in one of the coaches which lined the platform.

Her companion was just about to follow her into the carriage, having given directions in a low undertone hurriedly to the driver, when he felt himself suddenly seized from behind.

A strong, muscular arm dealt him a stinging blow in the face that caused him to measure his full length on the platform, and a ringing voice cried out harshly:

“You dastardly wretch, if I were to serve you right, I should thrash you within an inch of your miserable life, and then hand you over to the police for this as well as the many other crimes laid at your door. By Heaven! I think I will thrash you to teach you a lesson!”

But before the gentleman could put his threat into execution, the bold stranger had sprung to his feet, and with one dash, and the fleetness of a deer, took himself off.

It was not worth while pursuing him, and the gentleman turned his attention to Aurelia, who had sprung from the carriage, screaming with terror.

“You have escaped the worst scoundrel and blackleg that this country has ever produced, miss!” he exclaimed, adding, severely: “When young girls are so careless of the law which governs good society as to make chance acquaintances, nine times out of ten they come to grief through them. You have escaped through little less than a miracle! I heard you say you were going to Deephurst; there stands your train; I am going there myself; there is no other depot.”

He saw her hesitate and glance up at him fearfully.

“I would not direct you wrong, or take advantage of your foolish innocence,” he said, frowning impatiently. “There is my card,” he added; “every one hereabouts knows me. You can inquire of the conductor yonder for yourself, if you prefer.”

Aurelia took the card timidly and glanced at it. Oh, horror!

The name she read engraved upon it was Randolph Clavering!

CHAPTER XV.

“OH, IT IS DREARY—I AM AWEARY OF RIDING ALONE.”

RANDOLPH CLAVERING! Great Heaven! could it be possible that this was he?

Aurelia looked in dismay from the bit of pasteboard she held in her hand to the face of the young man standing before her.

She saw in that one quick, startled glance that he was all and finely formed, and of commanding presence—probably of some seven-and-twenty years—singularly handsome, with the dark beauty of a god; a haughty face it was, from the dark, flashing, cold eyes to the curl of the scornful lip under the thick drooping mustache.

Princely though he looked, he was no lily-handed, curled woman’s darling. He was not the sort of man that women make game of and men abhor—in fact, those who knew him best declared him a woman-hater, if there ever was one.

Aurelia looked into the dark, grim, handsome face, the color coming and going in great crimson waves over her cheek and brow.

“Mr.—Clavering,” she said, very faintly, “I—I am Aurelia Lancaster; I am on my way to your mother’s place at Deephurst.”

And she raised those wondrous wine-dark eyes entreatingly, eagerly to his face.

He crushed back the imprecation that trembled on his lips, and which this sudden intelligence had nearly surprised him into uttering, and bowed, remarking:

“In that case, please consider yourself in my charge, Miss Lancaster. This is our train to Deephurst. Come.”

Without ceremony he takes her arm, and with swift, swinging strides hurries her along the platform with more haste than elegance.

They have barely time to board the train ere it steams out from the depot; and in another moment they are whirling on as swiftly as steam can carry them toward Deephurst.

As Aurelia sinks back on her seat she steals another

glance at her companion seated opposite her, and again a flush of deep mortification suffuses her cheek and brow.

What must he think of her? What a pity that he happened to be on that train, and saw from beginning to end that terrible flirtation that she thought no one would ever know about! What must he think of her?

After seeing her safely ensconced, Mr. Clavering had drawn a copy of a morning paper from his pocket, and was soon deeply absorbed in its columns; but for all that he was not entirely oblivious to the fact that a pair of wistful dark eyes, looking out from a rose-leaf face, were studying him intently.

An hour passes—two—still Mr. Clavering is deeply immersed in his paper.

Aurelia thinks he must have forgotten her entirely.

“Mr. Clavering,” she breaks in at length, somewhat timidly.

He lays down his paper and looks at her, coldly, questioningly.

“I hope you will not—not mention what happened to-day—to your—your mother,” she says, with a little shiver.

“No,” he replies, with brusque, scant politeness.

“Do you think—even if she knew—she would censure me so very much?” breathed Aurelia, piteously.

“I believe she would—most assuredly,” he answered, promptly. “She is not one to condone a fault.”

“What an uncivil bear he is,” thought the girl, darting him an angry look from her blazing eyes. “I hate Randolph Clavering. I’m sure I do not envy the girl he is going to marry. He might at least have said something kind or—or—civil, to take the sting of my mortification away. I believe he enjoys my discomfiture over the unfortunate affair; but I am determined on one thing, and that is, that he shall not see that I care.”

And she crested her curly head with all the pride of an angry princess, and looked resolutely out of the window, staring into vacancy until they reached Deephurst.

Clavering alighted from the train and held out his hand to assist his companion, but Aurelia drew back with a haughty gesture.

“I can help myself, thank you,” she said, very ungraciously, and with what she considered a very insolent, supercilious smile.

His hand dropped to his side, and he waited very calmly for her to make her way down the three steep steps, bundles and all.

Alas! for Aurelia! She had miscalculated her powers.

Her high French heel caught in the braiding of her dress, and the next instant she felt herself whirling through space; and she would have struck the platform face downward had not Mr. Clavering sprung quickly forward and caught her in his arms; but this did not prevent the bundles flying in all directions.

As Mr. Clavering raised her to her feet—his arms just a trifle more tightly about the slim waist than the occasion really demanded—their eyes met, and, in his dark, flashing eyes she reads suppressed amusement.

“Why don’t you laugh right out at me if you want to?” she cries passionately, struggling out of his arms. “Why don’t you tell me that you are very glad of it, and that I richly deserve it, as I see you are longing to do.”

Mr. Clavering thinks it rude to disagree with her, so makes no reply to this vehement, childish outburst.

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” Aurelia almost sobs aloud, “I am always making myself ridiculous before Randolph Clavering. I hate him—yes, I do. Those cold, calm black eyes of his put my nerves fairly on edge. I could not help falling, I’m sure, knowing that he was staring at me.”

“There is the coach yonder which will take you to the villa,” he said, indicating a splendid private equipage standing at some little distance. “Will you take my arm as far as there?” he adds quietly—and ironically, she thinks, and this acts as a spur to her anger.

“No, indeed,” she replies, stiffly, with an effort to look dignified, which her laughing style of beauty renders peculiarly unsuccessful.

Clavering smothers a smile and bows gravely, conducting her in silence to the vehicle.

This time she makes no remonstrance when he helps her into the coach, for, with a quick glance, she sees

that the step is high, and she is in imminent danger of another catastrophe unless she accepts the proffered assistance.

She supposes he is going to take the seat beside her, and draws aside her skirts.

After all, it is a pleasurable anticipation—riding through the warm glow of the sunlight in this splendid coach—even though she does have to submit to having grim, haughty Randolph Clavering for a companion.

But instead of following her into the vehicle, Mr. Clavering turns to the coachman and says, in a voice slightly louder than he usually used, and by which Aurelia understood that the sentence was meant for her quite as well as for the man:

“You need not mention at the villa that I came by this train, John; they expect me later,” and with that he lifted his hat with a careless, graceful bow to Aurelia, turned, and sauntered away.

Aurelia told herself that she was delighted at this unexpected deliverance from his company; but for all that the surrounding hills and vales and the roadsides, starred with wild blossoms, pink and white, thick as evening stars, did not seem half so enjoyable as she had anticipated—one cannot enjoy riding alone. Perhaps it was the sun shining hotly against the plate-glass windows that made her feel so uncomfortable—possibly it may have been the jolting of the carriage over the rough stones of the country road, or—or her tumultuous thoughts might have had something to do with it. She was wondering what Mr. Randolph Clavering thought of her.

How unfortunate that he had first seen her under such very unfavorable auspices! Not that she really cared—oh, no, certainly not; but then it is so awfully provoking to know that people form adverse opinions of one.

Aurelia's reflections came to a sudden end by the coach turning abruptly into a grand park. There was a short drive up a winding paved road overarched with elm-trees.

Then the villa, an imposing structure of gray stone, turrets, and gabled roof peeping out from a network of ivy-vines and clambering roses, loomed into sight. Aurelia sees that there are two ladies seated on the porch

in willow rockers, but she cannot get a good view of the faces for the patchwork of shifting vine-leaves; but she surmises in all probability that they are Mrs. Clavering, the mother of the much-hated Randolph, and Miss Erskine, which surmise proved correct.

While she is taking this survey, the coachman springs down from his box and throws open the door, and Aurelia alights.

Both ladies rise, and as the girl comes forward, one lady comes swiftly down the porch to meet her.

“Miss Lancaster,” she exclaims in a sweet, low voice, holding out her white, thin, jeweled hands, “I am pleased to see you, my dear!” and she bends down and kisses Aurelia’s red cheek, looking admiringly into the dark, piquant beauty of the girl’s bright young face, adding with a smile: “Why, you are not like your twin sister Margaret in a single feature—how strange! I am Mrs. Clavering.”

Aurelia bit her lips to keep from answering hastily—that she had been quite sure of that fact from her unmistakable resemblance to her dark, handsome son.

“My dear,” continued Mrs. Clavering, “allow me to present you to Miss Erskine, my husband’s ward. Maud, come here, my love, and welcome Miss Lancaster.”

A tall girl, in a white mull dress, came indolently forward. Two rather cold lips met Aurelia’s, and Maud Erskine murmured a polite fib about being delighted to welcome her to the villa.

Then both girls drew quickly back from each other’s embrace and took mental stock of each other.

“As beautiful as an houri, and impertinent,” concluded Miss Erskine.

In one swift glance Aurelia took in every detail of the coiled yellow hair, the sea-blue eyes and calm, proud face of her companion, and the thought that passed through *her* brain was:

“So this is the girl—the beauty and the heiress whom they wish Randolph Clavering to marry?”

CHAPTER XVI.

"NEVER TELL THAT WE HAVE MET BEFORE."

"MY dear," says Mrs. Clavering, turning to her ward, "I think you had better take Miss Lancaster up to her room; she must be very tired, indeed, from her long journey, and will want to rest and freshen up a bit before dinner."

The words were no sooner uttered than Mrs. Clavering felt two arms around her neck and a pair of dark, sweet eyes were looking into hers, and a voice said, coaxingly:

"Won't you call me Aurelia, please? I *hate* to be called Miss Lancaster—it sounds so formal, you know."

"Certainly," returned Mrs. Clavering, smiling at the girl's charming frankness of manner; "I should prefer it."

Miss Erskine's thin red lip curled scornfully, and a sudden gleam came into the sea-blue eyes, and the thought flittered through her brain:

"Will the little minx make the same request of Mr. Clavering, Sr., and—and Randolph, I wonder?"

But when Aurelia turned toward her, not even the faintest shadow of a frown ruffled Miss Erskine's white brow.

"Come this way," she said, sweetly, purposely refraining from calling her by any name. And together the two young girls disappeared within the house.

"Please do not go; do not leave me yet," entreated Aurelia, as they reached the pretty suit of rooms designated for her use. "I love to have some one to talk to while I brush out my hair and change my dress; I hate being alone—really I do."

"Just as you like," responded Miss Erskine, seating herself languidly in the blue satin arm-chair by the window. "I cannot stay very long, though, for I must arrange my own toilet for dinner; we dine very punctually here—six o'clock sharp."

"Are there to be guests?" asked Aurelia, curiously.

A pink flush crept up under the alabaster whiteness of Miss Erskine's skin.

"No—only the usual members of the family," she an-

swered, carelessly, adding, hesitatingly, "we are expecting Randolph—that is, Mrs. Clavering's son—home to day. He has been absent over a month."

Aurelia turned away, that her companion should not see the red wave of color that burned hotly in her cheeks—"not at the mention of that name," she told herself, "but at the recollection of the knowledge hidden in her breast, that Mr. Clavering *had* come already. He was evidently not consumed with over-eagerness to see the loved ones at home."

"Have you always lived here?" asked Aurelia, suddenly, looking thoughtfully at the pretty blonde reclining so nonchalantly among the sky-blue cushions.

"Since I was a child," responded Miss Erskine, adding, "Mrs. Clavering seems just like a mother to me."

"And I suppose her son seems just like a brother to you?" remarked Aurelia, naively.

"That does not necessarily follow," laughed the blonde beauty, softly.

"Does young Mr. Clavering spend much of his time here?" asked Aurelia, eagerly, the question falling from her lips ere she was aware.

"No; but why do you ask?" said Miss Erskine, raising her blonde eyebrows in well-bred surprise.

"I should think it would make it so much pleasanter for you if he did," responded Aurelia.

"Yes," admitted Miss Erskine, "it does make it pleasanter, of course, when Randolph is here. Still, where one has seen one all of one's past life, and must see one during all the years to come, why, these short absences of a month or two's duration now and then should not be minded."

Miss Erskine uttered this parting shot with the utmost *sang froid*, darting a quick glance at Aurelia to see if any expression of her face indicated that she had taken in the subtle meaning meant to be conveyed in those well-chosen words.

"So it is really settled, then—beyond a doubt—that you are to marry Randolph Clavering," was the thought that burned its way like the sharp cut of a knife through Aurelia's brain.

But she made no answer.

Of course they must be betrothed, according to that

remark, and yet, with an anxious glance at the slim white hand playing so indolently with the silk balls of the curtain, she noticed Miss Erskine wore no engagement-ring to signify the fact that her future was signed and sealed.

Dinner was a very ceremonious affair at Clavering villa.

The ladies always appeared in fresh, becoming toilets for the occasion, whether there were guests or not.

All of the family plate and rare old china was brought into requisition, and the table was dressed with the choicest cut flowers and tropical fruits.

There was an extra amount of decorations on the table to-night in honor of the return of the son whom Mrs. Clavering adored.

Aurelia chose from her wardrobe a pink mull dress with loopings of silver ribbon on her breast, and tying back her dark curls; but she fairly caught her breath when Miss Erskine came to her to show her the way down to the dining-room, saying that the bell had already rung, and Mr. Clavering, Sr., always insisted upon punctuality at meals.

"The gentlemen and Mrs. Clavering have already preceeded us to the table. Come, Aurelia," she added.

"Why, she looks quite as pretty as I do," thought vain Aurelia, glancing from her own exquisite face, which the mirror reflected, to the tall, graceful, trim figure 'draped in a cloud of pale-blue surah and white buds standing in the doorway.

They descended to the dining-room together, and the first face Aurelia saw looking at her from over the vase of crimson roses at one end of the table, was Randolph Clavering's.

Mrs. Clavering presented her son to Aurelia, and the black eyes seemed to say, as they met and held her own for an instant:

"Never mind mentioning that we have met before!"

Aurelia never remembered how she acknowledged the introduction.

She had the uncomfortable knowledge that she was blushing furiously, and that Miss Erskine was looking at her with cold, surprised eyes.

She knew too that Randolph Clavering must have no-

ticed her confusion, for, with fact for which she could almost have blessed him, he drew their attention away from her at once, and centered it upon himself, riveting it there.

He could be very entertaining when he liked; but it was seldom that Randolph Clavering exerted himself to interest and please.

As he talked, Aurelia gleaned from his conversation that he had been quite a traveler, and this, added to the natural polish and refinement a finished course at Yale gives, made this well-bred young man rather fascinating in the girl's eyes.

The conversation was general; he did not direct one question to Aurelia; but more than once in raising her eyes suddenly—impelled by some magnetic influence she could scarcely define—she would find those dark, fathomless, blood-stirring, flashing eyes bent full upon her face—and the look in them puzzled her—it was certainly not admiration that she read in them.

There was quite a different light in his eyes when he looked at Miss Erskine or addressed her.

After dinner the young ladies sought the parlor, and the secret wish in the heart of both was, that Randolph Clavering would join them there, but he did not come, and after awhile it grew a trifle tedious to these two young girls trying to amuse each other, when the heart of neither one was in the work.

Mrs. Clavering joined them, but, as she always fell into a dose over her magazine when she attempted to read by the mellow glow of the gas lamp, she was soon in that land of bliss from whence the mortal spirit returns all too soon—happy dreamland.

Aurelia suppresses a yawn, and inwardly hopes that all evenings at Clavering villa will not be spent in this fashion; if they were, she would certainly die of *ennui*.

Miss Erskine notices the suppressed yawn, and says, quickly:

“Tell me when you are tired and wish to go to your room.”

The ormolu clock on the marble mantel points its gilded hand to nine. Of course Mr. Randolph Clavering will not come into the parlor *now*, so Aurelia seizes the opportunity of breaking away from Miss Erskine's

company with as much alacrity as good breeding will permit.

The girls exchange "good-night" very sweetly, and kiss each other—was there ever such a sham in this world as the kisses of women, anyhow? and Aurelia flits down the broad corridor, and up the stairs to her room.

Nine, rings out some deep-throated clock in a far-off belfry. Aurelia flings herself down in a chair by the window and wonders what she will do with herself for the next hour; only nine o'clock—it is but the edge of the evening—she can never sleep before ten. A lucky thought comes to her; why not go down to the library, get some good novel—if the shelves of this stately house contain such a rarity—and come back and read herself to sleep?

Aurelia is a creature of impulse, she acts on the thought at once; she gains the library, and is just about to push open the door which is slightly ajar, when the sound of her own name on the lips of some one within the room causes her to pause involuntarily an instant and peer curiously in; and this is what she sees: Randolph Clavering seated in an arm-chair by the library table, one hand resting on his chair, his dark, handsome head thrown back, and Miss Erskine kneeling on a low hassock at his side.

CHAPTER XVII.

"OH, CONSTANCY IN LOVE, THOU ART INDEED A JEWEL!"

"REALLY, Randolph," Miss Erskine was saying in her sweet, smooth voice, "do you not think Aurelia Lancaster pretty? You seem to avoid the question."

"If you insist upon an answer—I must say no," returns Mr. Clavering, sharply and impatiently.

"She has just the style of face—dark, sparkling—with that piquant, tip-tilted nose that most men would admire," says Miss Erskine softly, watching her companion's face keenly as she speaks. Adding, more softly: "Why do you not admire her, Randolph?"

“Possibly because the young lady is not my style,” he says, carelessly.

“What is your style, as you phrase it?” she asks eagerly.

“A quiet, reserved girl, and, above all, a sensible, refined one,” he replies; “and then, dark men—like myself—prefer fair, very fair women; even in the verdant days of callow youth my heart never throbbed the faster for the glance of a dark-eyed girl.”

“You believe there is a natural attraction only in opposites of complexion?” she says, in a pleased voice.

“That is the way it should be,” he admits.

Aurelia waits to hear no more. She realizes the truth very bitterly of the old adage, that listeners never hear any good of themselves.

She wheels suddenly about and flies noiselessly back to her own room.

Her face is one burning flush from throat to forehead, and angry tears stand on her long lashes.

“Not his style, indeed!” she cries, clinching her little hands angrily together and striding up and down the room very much like a ruffled panther.

“He likes refined, quiet, sensible girls, does he? Evidently I am not one of those in his mind’s eye; of course he was thinking of that—that provoking episode that happened on the train. Oh, dear, how I *hate* him! How unfortunate that he was on that train,” she mutters, between her angry sobs.

She resolves to go back to Romaine Farm the very next day, and not stay a moment longer than is necessary beneath the roof where the grim, hateful son dislikes her so.

And full of this determination, the discomfited beauty creeps into bed, draws the lavender-scented sheets tightly up around her curly head—her face downward buried deep in the eider-down pillow—drifts into a deep sleep, and dreams of the dark, handsome, haughty face of Randolph Clavering.

Morning dawns, bright and golden, and the moment Aurelia opens her heavy-lidded eyes the events that transpired on the previous evening come back to her.

Shall she go directly home again or not? is the question that agitates her to no little extent, as she hurries

through her toilet. Shall she run away like a little coward, or shall she stay, and vanquish this foe on his own battle-ground—let him see that she does not care one snap of her white fingers whether he likes her or detests her? She is sure of one thing—the feeling of dislike is certainly mutual.

She takes extra pains, though, in choosing her dress. She selects the one with the soft, crimson silk bows that Gerald Romaine liked best to see her in.

How much Gerald admired it; ten to one Randolph Clavering would not even notice it; still it was not for him she was taking so much pains to enhance her beauty—certainly not—oh, dear, no!

Mr. Randolph Clavering was reading his morning paper at the table when the two girls entered the breakfast-room a little later.

He bowed very politely to both, then resumed his reading; evidently Miss Lancaster not being *his* guest, he did not feel called upon especially to entertain her. There were enough to entertain and put themselves out of the way for her without him troubling himself.

At length, when they bring in his coffee and rolls, he lays down his paper and allows them to drag him into the conversation.

They have seated Aurelia opposite him, and he looks at her face now and then as she speaks or laughs gayly—his keen eyes undazzled by all the pretty tints and harmonious hues that feast them.

Aurelia ignores him completely—never once does he catch the dark, bright, saucy eyes turned in his direction, after the first formal glance that accompanied her bow as she seated herself; and Randolph Clavering rather likes that. He likes immensely to be let alone by women.

They make a dead set for him usually, and he makes it a matter of point to show them that, if not a woman-hater in truth, he has at least a heart that is invulnerable.

He is glad; if Miss Lancaster is to remain at the villa a month, she will not expect him to dance attendance upon her. She has a trifle more sense, he thinks, than he credited her with.

Mrs. Clavering had liked calm, sweet Margaret Lan-

caster well; but she fairly adored Aurelia, after the fashion of every one in general.

She determined that Aurelia's visit at the villa should be a memorable one to the girl—it was destined to be, in more ways than one.

“We must crowd as much pleasure as is possible into every day, my dear,” said she, smiling fondly into Aurelia's lovely face. “We have something on the tapis for almost every day in the week, I believe. I have given my ward *carte blanche* to begin the festivities with a grand ball. Shall you like that?”

“Yes,” declared Aurelia, enthusiastically; “it will be delightful.”

“We have not had many balls at the villa of late years,” continued the lady, “for my son Randolph does not dance now; unlike most young men, he detests it. A ball is the height of frivolity, in his estimation.”

“He will surely be present at *this one*, will he not?” asked Aurelia, suddenly—eagerly.

“If I were to venture an opinion, I should say not,” laughed Mrs. Clavering, uneasily.

“But how can he help being present when it is in his own house?” persisted Aurelia, curiously.

“He always makes it a point to absent himself on all such festive occasions—I cannot really comprehend clearly why.”

“Then let us not have the ball, if your son has such an aversion to them,” said Aurelia, thinking what a failure the ball would really be if Randolph Clavering were not there.

But Mrs. Clavering would not hear to this.

No; the ball must be given, that Aurelia might meet all the young people thereabout who were worth knowing.

To the intense surprise of the whole family, when informed of it, Randolph signified his intention of being present.

The week that intervened between that and date fixed for the grand event, passed all too quickly to Aurelia.

Almost every hour in the day she saw Randolph Clavering.

And from the time she left Romaine Farm, through all those fleeting days, not once did Aurelia's fickle heart

turn to the fair-haired young lover who was wearing his very heart out with hopeless watching, and waiting for the letter that failed to come.

Only Margaret—faithful, patient, sorrowing Margaret—saw his anxiety, and guessed truly the cause of it.

Twice a day he saddled his horse, and rode over to the village post-office.

Margaret knew that he must have gone there, for he always came back with a face as white as death. By that she surmised, too, that his errand must have been fruitless.

How she pitied Gerald Romaine then!

He could not bear the heart-burning suspense any longer. He must talk to somebody about it, so one day he sought out Margaret, where she was picking fruit in the orchard.

He flung himself down on the grass, and watched silently the white fingers among the green leaves for awhile; then, at length, burst out suddenly:

“Oh, Margaret, what in the world is the reason, do you suppose, that Aurelia does not write to us? She has been gone a week—seven long days—and yet we have no word from her—not a line. Don’t--don’t—you find—it--unbearable, almost?”

She looked at the white, haggard face with the deepest pity; her heart ached for him.

Ah, me, what a wealth of love he lavished on Aurelia.

She longed, with all her womanly heart, to go up to him and kneel beside him, and comfort him; but that must not be.

She turned to him calmly.

“You know, Gerald,” she said simply, “Aurelia always disliked writing. We shall hear from her one of these days--very soon, I hope.”

“Where her heart is, there her thoughts are also,” he quoted miserably. “If her thoughts were with me—with us”—he corrected quickly—“her will to have written would have been so great that she *must* have obeyed it; and it would have been a pleasure to her, don’t you think so?”

“She may be refraining from writing, to make us the more anxious to receive her letters,” returned Margaret,

with an attempt to laugh, "and that we may prize them the more when we *do* get them."

But he shook his head with a deep, heavy sigh.

"Where there is *true love*, Margaret," he said gravely, "no such thoughts enter the heart. Believe me, when letters are few and far between—no matter how ardent they are in the beginning—love soon cools—it *must*—it must—it needs constant application, with some hearts, to keep love in a flame. Margaret, I have a strange premonition of coming evil. I cannot shake it off."

Poor Gerald! It took material shape sooner than he expected.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"DOES SHE LOVE ME—OR HATE ME?"

It was a new life for Aurelia; the gayety and brightness of it fascinated her.

This was something worth living for, being surrounded with luxury a princess might envy, eating the choicest of food on dishes of silver, and being waited upon by liveried servants.

How happy Maud Erskine must be in the knowledge that all this splendor was to be hers forever; yes, forever, and dark, handsome Randolph Clavering was to be given into the bargain as her husband.

Surely Miss Erskine's lines had fallen in pleasant places.

Aurelia could not see that there was much affection between Mr. Clavering and Maud; but then, people in high life always eschewed the Joan and Darby style of courtship as exceedingly bad form.

Still, they might show a little more interest in each other, she thought.

Since the hour Aurelia heard the remark that fell from Randolph Clavering's lips about her not being "his style," she avoided him on every possible occasion.

If she is in the library and he enters it, she rises from her seat and leaves the room; if she is in the drawing-room and he saunters in, she makes a hasty exit at once;

if he joins Miss Erskine and herself on the lawn, she finds an excuse to break away at the earliest possible moment.

At first Randolph Clavering is immensely satisfied with this procedure.

Miss Lancaster has more sense than he at first gave her credit for, he tells himself, grimly. She has done what all the rest of the girls who come to the villa do not, she has left him alone.

But after a little this constant avoidance of him rather piques the handsome heir of Clavering villa.

“Upon my word, the girl actually acts as though she thought me an ogre,” he thought, angrily, as Aurelia swept out of the drawing-room like a young queen one day immediately upon his entrance, and without an apparently good reason.

This is the first time this phase of the case has appeared to Mr. Clavering, and evidently he does not relish it, for his dark brows deepen into a decided frown; surely it cannot be his fancy.

He makes up his mind to study Aurelia Lancaster more closely, and see if she has really an aversion to him.

He thought over the matter when he went to his smoking-room that day.

That was the one place where he could always think in peace, for, in this isolated room, which no one save himself ever entered, no servant dare disturb the young master of Clavering villa.

His temper was the worst thing about Randolph Clavering.

Two or three luckless servants, who had had the hardihood to seek him here, repeatedly knocking for admission, knowing him to be within, had met a reception when the door opened to them at length, that they never forgot.

This room saw much of Randolph Clavering; days at a time he spent here, whenever he was at the villa, keeping the apartment securely locked when he was away.

The floor was inlaid with marble—black and white—and as polished as a mirror where the heavy rugs strewn about did not obstruct it from view.

Ormolu tables and costly buhl chairs were strewn about the apartment, and oaken cabinets loaded with intaglios stood facing the western wall.

These, and numerous costly articles of *bizarrerie*, which Randolph Clavering called his "world-scrappings"—for he had collected all of the unique furnishings of this apartment abroad—testified to the reckless extravagance of their owner.

A stranger, looking upon Randolph Clavering for the first time, would have found it difficult, in gazing at that dark, grim, handsome face, to realize that he was but seven or eight-and-twenty. No rosy memories of early, happy manhood lingered here, no dewy gleam of the bright morning of life when hope painted and peopled a smiling world.

Midnight orgies and habitual excesses had left their never-to-be-mistaken marks on his countenance.

People hinted secretly that he must have had some deep love-affair abroad, that made him, when he returned, so truly a woman-hater—else why was he so cynical, acrid, and bitter?

He was living far in advance of his youth. His brilliant intellect would have lifted him to any eminence he desired, and which, if properly directed, would have made him an ornament to society, which he took much satisfaction in snubbing and deriding.

Like all strong, though misguided natures, the very power of his brilliant mind enhanced his wretchedness, and drove him farther and farther from the path of rectitude, while the consciousness that he was originally capable of higher and purer aims and nobler pursuits than those that now engrossed his perverted thoughts, rendered him savagely morose.

Randolph Clavering threw himself down in an easy-chair by the window, and, with a cigar between his lips, looked the question curiously in the face—was he so much of an ogre that he inspired hate, abhorrence, in the heart of this young girl? The thought aroused him to something very like anger.

From his window he could see Miss Erskine and Aurelia out on the lawn.

The girl had pleasant enough smiles for Miss Erskine

—how quickly her face grew haughty and cold at his approach.

Randolph Clavering watched her curiously; he had told himself over and over again that, young as she was, no woman of the world was more of an adept in the miserable art of coquetry and flirtation than she. Had he not witnessed it on the train, the first time he had ever seen her?

Bah! why should he waste a thought on this pretty, gypsyish-faced girl? but, though he said that, he could not help but watch keenly the slim, white-robed figure, as she flitted to and fro on the lawn.

Aurelia was having a game of croquet with Miss Erskine—he wondered if she would find some excuse to leave the lawn if he sauntered out there.

A moment later both of the girls saw him leisurely approaching.

He stopped short a few feet from them, leaned against the trunk of a tree, and proceeded to indolently watch the game through the blue wreaths of smoke from his fragrant Havana.

“Won’t you join us, Randolph?” asks Miss Erskine, stooping to reinstate a fallen hoop, and looking eager invitation at him out of her sea-blue eyes.

Randolph Clavering hesitates, and looks toward Aurelia to see if she will second the invitation, but she does not appear to see him she is so intent in examining her mallet.

It is years since he has touched a mallet—and he hates the game, Miss Erskine well knows, and she is rendered quite speechless to see him come forward saying:

“Since you and Miss Lancaster desire it so particularly, I don’t mind taking a mallet.”

“I’m sure *I* did not say I desired it, Mr. Clavering,” said Aurelia, with a wicked, saucy look at him from her black, flashing eyes. The color comes into her dimpled face and lips, and she glories in the fact that she has had one good shot at him, which pays him back handsomely for that ungracious remark that she was not “his style, not sensible,” etc.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” he says, struggling with a grim smile at this dash of spirit, and throwing down the mallet, “I won’t exhibit my skill unless you say you

particularly wish it. It is the stupidest game that ever any idiot invented, anyhow—not fit to amuse babies—ridiculous for grown men and women to engage in.”

“Not half so ridiculous as billiards, and they say you are an adept at that,” flashed back Aurelia, spiritedly.

“Billiards is a scientific game,” he answered, coldly.

“I should like to know if coquet—which is on the same principle, is not equally as much so?” retorted Aurelia.

At that moment some one from the house calls to Miss Erskine—and although she is in a secret rage at leaving those two *tete-a-tete* together—she has no choice but to go.

“I will be back almost directly,” she says, sweetly, and one heart which she leaves behind her hopes to Heaven that she will not make unnecessary haste in returning.

This is the first time Randolph Clavering has found himself alone with Aurelia for a number of days.

She is just about to follow Miss Erskine, when he puts a detaining hand on her arm.

“Do not go just yet,” he said—adding with a dash of hauteur in his voice—“I am not a roaming lion, you need not be afraid of my devouring you, young lady. Please do not go, I want to talk to you,” and as he spoke he drew nearer to her unconsciously.

She, looking at him—so handsome in his dark, fascinating beauty, with the halo of wealth about him, triumphant, indifferent, utterly ignoring the charms of fair women, almost laughing at them, and treating them as though they were exquisite toys, longed to know if he had a heart.

This thought came to her with the force and keenness of a sharp instrument. She longed to see that expression of supreme indifference fade from his face.

Aurelia looked up and met his keen, searching gaze, and her heart commenced throbbing.

Was it possible that proud, haughty Randolph Clavering, whom they said *hated women*, and whose parents were using every endeavor to wed to the heiress of their choice, was falling in love with *herself*?

The dream was so dazzling—so wild, that for a mo-

ment it fairly made Aurelia's senses dazed as she stood there.

CHAPTER XIX.

"I SEE THY FACE IN EVERY DREAM—MY WAKING THOUGHTS ARE FULL OF THEE."

"I WILL listen to what you have to say, providing it does not take you very long to say it," replied Aurelia, affecting an indifference she was far from feeling.

For a moment he was silent. Then he turned to her slowly, asking gravely:

"I should like to ask you this one question, Miss Lancaster: why do you hate me so bitterly? What reason have I ever given you for it? I should be pleased if you would give me a perfectly candid answer."

The remarkable and unexpected question fairly amazed Aurelia.

She retreated a step, looking at him with wide-open, astonished eyes, her cheeks burning as scarlet as the deep-red passion roses on her fluttering bosom.

"Mr.—Clavering," she stammered, "what can you mean?"

"Simply what I have said," he retorted. "What have I ever done that should cause you to *hate* me? I know you *do* hate me—do not deny it."

"You are quite wrong in your surmise, Mr. Clavering," said Aurelia. "I do *not* dislike you."

"Then why do you avoid me so constantly?" he asked firmly.

"You are pleased to be fanciful," she replied, smiling coyly up into his dark, handsome, gloomy face. "I have never sought to avoid you—that is all your imagination."

He looked at her steadily, searchingly, a moment, then suddenly reached out and grasped her two little white hands, that were busily engaged in ruthlessly tearing a crimson rose to pieces, petal by petal, and flinging them down on the greensward at her feet.

"I have been looking at you and wondering what kind of a soul lay behind that beautiful face," he said, slowly.

“Do souls interest you as much as faces?” she asked curiously.

“Quite as much,” he replied. “Man of the world though I am—although there are few to whom I should admit as much—one does not tell the real thoughts of one’s heart except to one’s most intimate friends.”

“Do you class me among your most intimate friends, Mr. Clavering?” she murmured shyly, well pleased.

“Yes, if you will permit me to do so.”

“I am quite willing,” she said smiling. “But how long is this friendship to last—forever?”

“No,” he replied, “but only until one or the other should love. If——”

The sentence broke off in a muttered imprecation, which he crushed between his white teeth.

Glancing suddenly up, he saw Maud Erskine hurrying toward them.

He dropped Aurelia’s fluttering hands.

“Why do people always interrupt just at the moment when they are at least wanted?” he said, with a forced laugh.

“The afternoon mail has just come up,” said Miss Erskine sweetly. “There were some letters for me, and as there was one for you, I brought it out to you, Aurelia,” she added, placing a square, white envelope in the girl’s hand.

Aurelia took it from her.

One glance at the chirography, and she recognized Gerald Romaine’s writing.

“We will sit under the trees and read our letters,” said Maud. “It is pleasanter than taking them to the house, it is so close and warm there.”

“Mine is not very important—it can wait!” declared Aurelia, thrusting the letter quickly in her pocket; but not before Randolph Clavering, in that one quick, casual glance he had taken of it, had noted that the superscription of her letter was written in a bold, masculine hand—and hated the writer, whoever he may be.

“Don’t mind me, Miss Lancaster,” he says, seating himself at a little distance.

He wishes she would take that letter out of her pocket and read it then and there.

He wonders if it is from a lover? Surely not! The

girl is too young to have given a thought to love or lovers.

He should like to know if it is long or short. Contact with the world has made him quite an adept at mind-reading.

He would like to study her face as she perused it—to see if it could call up blushes or smiles—this letter whose superscription was in a masculine hand.

It was not until Aurelia reached her own room that she broke the seal of Gerald Romaine's letter—not with loving eagerness, but with an impatient frown on her face.

“When I am so happy, why must he write me, to bring my thoughts back to that hateful life!” she cried, stamping her foot angrily.

It was a long, closely-written letter, such as most girls like best to receive; but there was no glad heart-thrill in Aurelia's bosom—not one kind thought of the fair-haired lover who had penned it—as she drew it from the envelope and unfolded it with impatient hands.

It would have touched any other girl by its tenderness—not so Aurelia.

“MY DARLING,”—it ran—“I have waited, longed, and watched for a letter from you until patience has almost ceased to be a virtue with me. It is a week to-day since you left us, and how long and inexpressibly dreary the time has passed with me, you will never know. I have counted the long, dragging hours from sunrise to sunrise again, thinking *to-morrow* must surely bring me a letter; but I was doomed to disappointment with each succeeding day. I earnestly pray Heaven, my darling, that you may never experience such slow torture as I have endured in watching for your letters. It seems to me that you might take a few moments in which to write me—if it be only a line, dear!

“I wonder vaguely, oftentimes, if your thoughts are as much with me as mine are with you? I think of you with my first waking thought; your face smiles up at me from the waving grasses, the pale petals of the roses, and the waving green leaves of the trees as I pass them. I think of you through the long, dull watches of the night, and fall asleep with your dear name on my lips—only to dream of you!

“Oh, Aurelia—precious one—I sometimes think there was never before, in the heart of man, a love so deep, so soul-absorbing as mine.

“Looking forward to the time when I can claim you is the loadstar of my existence—the one happy dream of my life.

“You do not know how hard I am working to make fame, a name, and wealth for you, dearest! I long to surround you with all the pretty luxuries which I know so well my Aurelia’s heart craves. Sometimes I sit up all night and work patiently over my patents. Oh, my darling, I must be successful with them; there is no such word as failure with me. Heaven must let me succeed—there is so much at stake for me.

“Let me urge you not to delay writing to me, dear. I could work so much better if I had but one line from you to cheer me with my work.

“In your reply, dear, do not forget to tell me if you have met the son, Randolph Clavering, yet, and what he is like, what impression you have formed of him, if you find him an agreeable companion, and if you see very much of him.

“Tell me how you pass your time, if you are happy, or if you are beginning to feel lonely away from me. Has this Randolph Clavering a sweetheart?

“I am sure, my darling, you do not give any one but myself one thought; still, it would be a deep and sincere pleasure to me if you would assure me of this in your letter.

“Believe me, dearest, I cannot wait patiently much longer for a letter; if I do not hear from you in the course of the next three days I shall come on to Deephurst to find out what is the matter.

“Surely, darling, you have not fallen ill, and are requesting them to keep it from me. The very thought fills me with wild alarm. Do write me at once, love, to dispel my fears. And believe me to be, now and forever more, your loving, devoted
GERALD.”

Aurelia read the letter through without one tender gleam lighting her dark eyes, skimming it over to get to the end of it as quickly as possible, that she might join the others on the lawn again.

“Heavens!” she cried, excitedly, springing to her feet as she came to the sentence where Gerald threatened to come on to Deephurst; “such a calamity must be averted at all hazards. He would keep his word, I’m sure. I will have to write him this very day to keep him quiet.”

She wishes idly, as she toys with the envelope, that Gerald Romaine did not love her quite so much. This affair is growing altogether too serious.

She repents, too, of those few hastily spoken words which bind her to Gerald.

But for this engagement she would be free to be wooed and won—by Randolph Clavering.

She gives a great start as the thought comes to her; it is the first time she has ever thought of him in that light; and then—she remembers the reported betrothal of Randolph Clavering to Miss Erskine, but then, betrothals were nothing, it was not until he stood at the altar with Miss Erskine that he would be completely lost to her, she told herself.

Aurelia felt sure young Mr. Clavering was interested in her; else why should he care so much for her good opinion?

Oh, what a grand, dazzling dream it was to her—to think what the future might be as his wife.

She could have the life of luxury then that she craved. And dull, prosy existence would be heaven on earth with a man like him to love her.

CHAPTER XX.

“I AM THINKING OF YOU EVERY DAY!”

GERALD ROMAINE had not long to wait for his reply; it came within two days after he had written his letter to Aurelia, and he knew she must have answered it directly after she had read it.

He had ridden to the village post-office so many times within the last week, that the clerk was glad to hand him out the letter he was so eagerly looking for, remarking, he hoped it was the one he was expecting.

Gerald could not stop to answer him, the fever of

anxiety was so great to read what his darling had written.

He rode rapidly away, never stopping until he had reached the road on the outskirts of the village.

Here he would be free from interruption, and hastily dismounting, he tied his horse to a tree, and flung himself down among the cool shadows in the daisy-studded grass, and with eager hands tore open the envelope.

A cold chill of disappointment at the first glance passed over him. The letter was so brief; and then it chills the heart, too, to find a page half blank in a letter—as though the writer could find no more to say. Those who really love can fill up a score of pages in writing to the one beloved, and then feel that they have not said one half that was in their heart.

There is no better way in the world to gauge a lover's affection.

But this did not occur to Gerald Romaine.

Eagerly he devoured every word, investing each sentence with the deepest kind of love. Where one is so desperately in love, the commonest sentence is freighted with all that is beautiful in sentiment.

“DEAR GERALD,”—Aurelia wrote—“You must not think me so awfully unkind for not writing before; and, indeed, you would actually feel sorry for me if you knew how very many long letters I have written to you, and not thinking them good enough to send, tore them up again. I could never bear to write letters anyhow. The very minute I pick up a pen, every thought in my head flies from me, and I cannot think of a single nice thing to say to save my life.

“The Claverings are very nice people, and so is Miss Maud Erskine, old Mr. Clavering's ward. She is a great heiress. I do not think her a bit pretty, though everybody else does.

“Clavering Villa is a splendid place. They try to make it very pleasant for me. They have a great big library here, but the books are all so prosy I don't care for them.

“Oh, Gerald, I must not forget to tell you that I'm reading a book now, all about what young wives do when they go housekeeping, and I'm going to read a cook book

through after I finish with this—though I don't suppose it will be very interesting; as far as I read was awfully dull.

“I'm thinking of you night and day. Don't come here, Gerald—it wouldn't be polite, because you were not invited by the Clavering's, you know—and if there's anything they are strict about, it's social customs—proper form—etiquette. I haven't time to write any more just now, for I want to read another chapter about ‘Housekeeping and Young Wives’ before it is quite dark. Don't come here, Gerald.

“Yours ever so truly.

“AURELIA.”

Gerald Romaine read the letter over and over again impulsively, pressing his lips to every line he read.

“Ah, how I love her,” he murmured, tears dimming his dark-blue eyes; “she thinks of me night and day, she says; bless her for those comforting words! they will live in my heart until I see my darling and fold her in my arms!”

He threw his fair curly head back and laughed aloud at the idea of Aurelia—his pretty, dainty Aurelia—studying a cook-book; of course she found it dull; she should never have anything of that kind to do—never. She should have a servant; those slender, lily-white hands were never made for the drudgery of homely housework. He must have every luxury for her, he told himself.

For an instant a rueful look crossed his face as to where the money was to come from to do all this, but he banished it quickly away. Heaven *must* prosper him with his patents, for her dear sake, he murmured.

It was a happy ride back to the farm for Gerald; the green, sloping hills seemed more beautiful; the sunshine more golden; the flowers more fragrant; and the song of the birds more sweet than when he passed that way an hour before. It is so strange how love can radiate life!

Margaret noticed the change in him the moment her eyes rested on him.

The color had returned to his face, the shadow was lifted from his eyes; he was gay and happy—in the best

of spirits; his laugh rang out clear and joyous. She knew what was the matter with him at once—he must have had a letter from Aurelia; there was nothing else in the wide world that could have wrought such a change in him.

But she made no comment.

That evening, for the first time, Gerald sought her.

“Come, let us wander out into the grounds, Margy,” he said. “It is lonely to walk alone. Will you come?”

The girl’s heart thrilled with a pleasure so keen that it was almost pain; but she was not one to show her emotion.

She took up her hat, tied it on her fair hair, and went out into the grounds with him.

“Oh, Margaret,” he cried, impulsively seizing her hand, when they were out of sight and hearing of those at the house, “I have had a letter from Aurelia!”

“I thought so!” she returned, quietly.

“Why, how could you possibly have guessed it, Margy?” he cried, gayly.

“I thought it was about time for her to write—that is all,” she made answer, drawing her hand from his clasp.

“Margaret,” he said, eagerly, “if you knew the comfort to me of finding a friend to whom I can speak about Aurelia, you would know how happy you have made me in accompanying me out here—you would, indeed, Margy!”

She was a good and gentle girl, but she could have laughed a bitter laugh, more cruel than a sob, at those words. His friend! When will men learn that women who have loved them can never be simply their friend? Open enmity, or the coldness of strangers, would be a thousand times more preferable.

They had strolled in the moonlight beneath these very trees, with his arms about her—happy lovers, and now he had brought her there to tell her of his love for another.

Death could not have been harder to bear. It would have been more merciful if he had raised his hand and stricken her down at his feet.

He quite forgot that Margaret had ever loved him—his every thought was for and about Aurelia, and the

girl by his side uttered no word. He did not notice that every now and then she raised her white face to the star-gemmed heavens; he did not know she was asking the listening angels to plead with God to give her strength to bear it.

So, through the gloaming that had deepened into night, they walked up and down under the waving trees; and no one looking at the girl's calm face could have told that her pure, gentle heart was breaking.

He made her his *confidante*, and she listened to him; she heard, without betraying her emotion, his plans and hopes—how he trusted some day to be famous, to be rich; how he intended to work at his patents night and day to perfect and complete them, and, as soon as he had money enough, marry Aurelia.

“But, Gerald,” she said, looking into his flushed, eager face, “all this will take a long time. You cannot make a great name and wealth in a few days—it may take years. Will Aurelia be willing to wait for you?”

“I have no fear, Margaret,” he replied. “Indeed, I dare not fear. I could not fail in winning her. I must do all this within three months—I cannot wait for her longer. When a man's whole heart and soul are fixed on one idea, it must be carried out. I could not fail, Margy. Nothing but death could keep me from making the woman I love my wife. You see that sky overhead? I swear by it that I will make her my wife.”

She was frightened at his eagerness and vehemence. Was this the Gerald she had thought so cool, so indifferent, so poor a lover, this man all fire, all enthusiasm, all passion?

“How dearly you love her, Gerald,” she said faintly, and there was a sob in her voice; but he did not hear that.

He laughed a happy laugh that she never forgot.

“Yes, I love her,” he replied. “If I dare I should say that it was cruel for a man to have the power to love a woman as I love her. It is dangerous. It would be death to any one who came between us. I never knew how poor words were until I tried to express my love by them, Margaret.”

There was something pathetic about Gerald Romaine's idolatry for dark-eyed Aurelia.

His heart was light; he went to his room early, to be by himself to read Aurelia's letter all over again.

Gerald went to sleep that night with his heart full of triumph; his dreams were pleasant, for he dreamed of the fair face of the girl he loved so well; and Margaret went to her humble attic room, and knelt down and prayed for strength, that she might not break down under her burden, and wept until the dawn of morning gleamed in the eastern sky.

CHAPTER XXI.

“AM I FIRST IN YOUR HEART?”

WHEN Aurelia had dispatched her letter to Gerald Romaine, she felt easier.

“That will bridge the difficulty over very nicely,” she said to herself. “That will keep him away from Clavering villa,” and straightway she proceeded to forget him, devoting herself to the daily pleasures that surrounded her.

To her surprise and annoyance, Randolph Clavering did not seek her side again, to finish the conversation Miss Erskine had interrupted.

He seemed to have utterly forgotten that he had asked very earnestly that he might see her again.

Thus matters stood up to the day of the long looked-for ball. To Aurelia, this was to be the greatest event of her life. The first ball a young girl attends usually is.

Miss Erskine did not seem much elated over the contemplation of it—a ball was certainly no novelty to the haughty heiress—she was greatly surprised, however, at Randolph Clavering's avowal that he would be present.

She took more than ordinary pains with her toilet that evening, and it was certainly a vision of loveliness—if anybody liked such cold, statuesque beauty, that greeted Aurelia's eyes, as Miss Erskine tapped at her door to see if she were ready to go down to the parlors.

Aurelia uttered a cry of delight as she saw her; what could be more entrancing than this vision in sky-blue

tulle and foamy-white lace, with diamonds that seemed like a rope of fire about the firm alabaster throat, on the white arms, swinging from the perfect little ears, and twined amidst the meshes of her golden hair.

Of course Randolph Clavering must love her if he has ever seen her looking—like this; and Aurelia's heart gave a great jealous twinge. Her own white tulle with the simple garniture of fresh pine rose-buds seemed wonderfully commonplace in comparison. But then, she was prettier than Miss Erskine, Aurelia told herself vainly—“and beauty counted for something.”

The ball was a grand success—the elite of the whole surrounding country was present—but as the hours rolled on, and Randolph Clavering did not put in an appearance, Aurelia's high spirits began to wane, surrounded though she was by a whole coterie of admirers.

Mrs. Clavering, in looking over the throng of guests, and not seeing her son, inwardly guessed that he had changed his mind about attending the ball, and her surprise was great upon stepping out upon one of the small balconies, to find him seated there, smoking a cigar and watching the gay scene within with gloomy eyes and a dark frown on his handsome face.

“Randolph,” she cried, tapping his broad shoulder with her fan, “why are you not in there enjoying yourself?—for shame, sitting here—while so many young girls inside are wall-flowers, because they have no partners.”

“It is bad enough to watch other men making fools of themselves,” he answered brusquely.

“Randolph!” exclaimed his mother in amazement.

“For instance, there's young Harper, who has had the temerity to dance with Miss Lancaster six times in succession—if the girl has no better sense than that—he should have—— There!” he cried—smothering something very like an imprecation on his lips—“the fellow has the hardihood to lead her out for the waltz they are just striking up. By Heaven! that makes the seventh; really you should speak to Miss Lancaster about it, mother!”

“Young Mr. Harper is such an excellent dancer that I have often heard young ladies remark that it is a pleasure to waltz with him,” Mrs. Clavering remarked quiet-

ly, adding wistfully; "*You* used to be distinguished in the ballroom, Randolph. I am sorry it has grown so distasteful to you."

He laughed grimly.

"It is not the best form in the world to make remarks about one's guests," he said; "but I really think I could give young Harper some points. Graceful—bah—you amuse me, mother, in saying you think that poppinjay graceful. I do not know why you invited him here anyhow. You know I dislike him particularly."

"I was certainly not aware of it, Randolph," returned Mrs. Clavering, surprisedly. "I thought he was one of your intimate companions. Why, when you make up a party of gentlemen for your hunting and fishing expeditions, he is always one of the number. You must have grown to dislike him very lately."

Randolph Clavering's dark, handsome face flushed burning red.

"I have found out lately that Harper is an idiot," he replied impatiently, adding: "See what a fool he is making of himself to-night. There is neither rhyme nor reason in monopolizing a young girl for seven consecutive dances. Ah, there is Maud without a partner. I think I shall ask her for this waltz."

And into the ballroom he went, and straight up to Maud, and the next moment they were whirling away together to the melodious measures of "*My Queen*."

For the next hour or more Randolph Clavering devoted himself to the timid, pretty wall-flowers, much to the anger of Maud Erskine and the chagrin of Aurelia.

"I actually believe he does not see me," muttered Aurelia, with no little mortification. "He always turns his head away at my approach. Surely it could not be that he sees me."

But just at that moment she glanced up, and their eyes met.

The next instant Randolph Clavering was at her side.

"May I have this waltz, Miss Lancaster?" he said. "Or are you tired?"

"Yes," she confessed; "a little too tired to dance just now."

"Then perhaps you will promenade with me," he urged.

She rose at once and placed her kidded hand on his arm.

“Come out into the moonlight,” he whispered.

And the low, intense voice in which the words were uttered thrilled the girl to the very soul.

Oh, the beautiful world into which they went; a world all white with the silvery radiance of the moon, and the pale gleam of the stars on the sleeping flowers, the trees, and on the flowing waters of the fountain that dripped from Undine’s cold, marble white fingers.

“This is my favorite spot,” said Aurelia, pausing by the fountain. “I always bring my books here to read.”

They stood still for a few moment looking at the fountain in the moonlight.

The marble Undine was beautiful with its statuesque grace, its serene calm; but the girl, with her passionate, living beauty, the moonlight falling on her fair face, was more beautiful still.

For some moments the silence between them was unbroken.

Slowly but surely the calm of the witching hour came over Randolph Clavering; the odor of the flowers; the charm of the night sky; the dark eyes that drooped beneath his gaze; the white hand that trembled on his arm; the face that bent over the dimpling water—all conspired to shed a glamour over him.

“This reminds me of the lover’s night in the ‘Merchant of Venice,’ ” he said. “Nights in Italy are perfect like this—one can think of nothing but flowers and love.”

“Happy nights!” murmured Aurelia, bending her face lower over the marble basin, that her companion might not see the great wave of crimson that she felt burning her cheeks.

“Do not look down into the water—look up at me, Aurelia,” he whispered. “Ah! how cruel you have been to me—how you have tortured me to-night! You must have known that I came to the ball solely on your account, and you would not give me the opportunity of saying one word to you—until now.”

He bent nearer her, and before she could recover from her surprise he was kneeling at her feet.

He took her hand in his, and she made no attempt to elude that firm clasp.

“Aurelia,” he murmured, “when a man’s heart is quite full, it is very hard to find words. I am afraid,” he continued, “that you will find me abrupt. I am a bad wooer; I ought to have prefaced what I have to say with compliments, but I could not. I am too much in earnest; and a man in earnest does not think of these things. He gets to the point at once. It is not given to all men to woo in flowery language, or to be able even to express what they feel. I wish,” he cried, “that I knew in what words and in what fashion other men make love.”

“I do not think you are very deficient in eloquence,” she said, with a smile; “but does not your own heart teach you?”

“Yes,” he replied; “but I am not sure that the teaching was of the right kind; you do not encourage me; perhaps it is my own fault—that you do not understand me because I have not expressed myself clearly. Aurelia, my heart has gone out to you; I want you to be my wife; will you marry me?”

And he clasps her in his arms and kisses her.

She does not answer—emotions as complicated as they are intense check her utterance. Even here on this high pinnacle of bliss the thought of Gerald Romaine, her fair-haired lover, flashes over her—striking her heart with a cold, despairing chill, like the hand of death—stabbing her with remorse for allowing another man even the shadow of a caress.

“As my wife, you shall have everything your heart craves, Aurelia!” cried Randolph Clavering, eagerly. “All my wealth, with my heart and hand, I lay at your feet; your every wish shall be gratified. We will visit European countries. I will take you wherever your fancy wills. You shall have jewels a princess might envy—a retinue of servants—equipages that will outdo in splendor anything you have ever seen before. For your sake, I will make my name powerful. Wealth is powerful; it can place me in the Senate, if you so elect. I will be anything—everything your heart would wish me to be. You—won’t?” cries Randolph Clavering at length, mistaking the cause of her silence, and in a voice in which

extreme surprise and profound alarm and pain are mixed in equal degrees.

Still no answer.

He sprung to his feet and looked at her, his face white as death.

CHAPTER XXII.

ONE MAN OF HONOR.

“AURELIA!” he cried, never taking his eyes for one moment from that exquisite face, “if I am rough or abrupt, forgive me! I have but one excuse to offer, and that is the intensity of my love. I am not asking you for the happiness of a few years—for the contentment of a few months; my whole life is at stake!” he went on, vehemently. “I believe that, in my heart, good and evil are equally balanced. Given you—your love—happiness with you—and I honestly believe that, with the blessing of Heaven, I shall become not only a great man but a good man. I tell you this in all candor—if I lose you I shall go to the bad altogether, and I shall not be the first man who has gone wrong for a woman’s sake; I shall be adrift for life! But you would not do that—you would not have encouraged me if you had intended to kill me; and if you sent me away from you—if you took from me the hope of winning you, you would kill the best part of me. I dare not think it; I will not believe that you would encourage me, draw me on with your smiles and your eyes, as a heartless woman does. Ah, no! my fears are running away with me. You cannot be that most detestible of all creatures—a coquette.”

Still no answer; Aurelia tried to speak but could not.

“If you have been making a fool of me all this time, you might, at least, have the civility to tell me so,” he says, in a voice so sternly cold that remorse, coyness, and all other feelings merge into womanish fear.

She never forgot the look on the dark, handsome face, looking into hers—the scorn and defiance, mingled with passionate love; that look conquered her—she forgot Gerald Romaine—forgot everything, save the intense desire to bring back the tender light of love to the face before her.

“Don’t blame me until I deserve it,” she murmured,

with a faint smile; she finishes the sentence on his breast, but so low that only her lover hears it.

Somebody has said that perfect happiness never lasts more than two seconds in this world; at the end of that time his doubts return. He puts her a little way from him and looks at her steadily.

"I beg you to tell me the truth, Aurelia!" he cried; "do you like me, or do you not?"

"Yes; I like you," she answered in a very low voice.

"'Like' is such a comprehensive word," he says, with a slight, impatient contraction of his straight brows; "you like the old farmer whom you have lived with, you like his good wife and the people about you, but such liking as that I would fling from me; I must be first or nowhere! Am I first?"

"No," she replied with a little forced laugh.

His countenance fell, his face turned a shade paler.

"I am not?" he questioned, in a constrained voice; "who is, then, may I ask?"

"My sister, Margaret," she answered.

"Darling!" cried Randolph, looking immensely relieved, "how you frightened me! I thought there was 'another Richmond in the field.' I believe you did it on purpose to torture me. Well, after her, am I first?"

For a moment it almost seemed to Aurelia that her heart stopped beating. Was it the thought of Gerald? She could not tell what sudden impulse came over her, to pause on this, the brink of fate—what sudden, curious foreboding—what voice seemed to cry out to her: "Stop!" but one glance from those dark, impassioned eyes caused her to forget all else but the lover present, so she answered:

"Yes."

And, standing there listening to those low-breathed words of love, Aurelia realized that she loved this handsome, dark-eyed lover with a love such as Gerald Romaine could never have awakened in her heart.

"Darling!" cried Randolph, passing his arm round her half-shrinking, half-yielding form. "Can you possibly be fond of me?—assure me again that you are. The last woman who rested in my encircling arms let me kiss her as you are doing; she kissed me back again, as you do not do. I looked into her eyes, and they seemed

truth itself, and all the while she was lying to me; my very touch, every caress must have been hateful to her. Tell me that you love me with all your heart. You are truth itself, precious, I am sure."

Shivering, she drew back from his embrace.

"Have you, then, loved some one else?"

She was just about to add "too," but checked the word just in time on her lips.

He threw back his dark, handsome head, and laughed.

"I will tell you the truth, dear," he said quickly. "I am a man of the world, my life has not been like the stainless leaves of a lily; my faults—my vices were many, my virtues few. One does not knock about gay, wicked Paris for seven years and come out of the furnace flawless. I have loved so many women that it would really be a bore to look back and enumerate them—or rather, I thought I loved them—from a grisette to a countess. Hundreds have, in turn, had sway over my heart. At last I believed I loved with a love that surpassed all past loves. It was she who made me hate all women for her sake, up to the time I met—you. Let me tell you all about her, Aurelia—only a few words."

"If you did not love her still, you would not care to talk about her," declared Aurelia, with a sudden touch of jealousy.

"My love has turned to abhorrence long since," he returned gravely; "and I never cease thanking fate for turning my path away from hers."

And as he speaks, he draws Aurelia nearer and lays his lips upon her sweet red mouth.

"Let me tell you about it, Aurelia," he persisted. "I can talk about it and laugh now—the circumstance is really amusing. It will show you how much of a fool a man can make of himself—for love's sweet sake.

"I met the girl I refer to in Paris. She was a gay, sparkling, vivacious little stage beauty—just such a one as usually attracts a young man's romantic fancy. She soon let me know that the only way to reach her coy heart was to pave the way with glittering diamonds—her every smile cost me the ducats, and I was only too anxious to purchase her favor at whatever cost—ay, at the price of my very soul.

“I had the fondest dreams of making her my wife. I would brave the anger of my father, the bitter disappointment of my mother, I told myself, and, despite the opposition of the whole world, marry the woman I loved.

“One day my dream came to a sudden end—the rumor reached me that my charmer was not to be wooed and won—she was already wedded.

“Mad with torture at the very thought of such a possibility, I flew to her with the cruel report, and begged her on my knees to assure me that the story was false.

“‘Do not take it so much to heart, Randolph,’ she said, caressing me with her little, white hands. ‘The story you have heard is true enough; but does it make any difference to you? I *hate* the man to whom I am bound. I—I—like *you* best.’

“‘Hush!’ I cried, springing from my knees to my feet—‘not another word more!’ and I flung her hand from my arm as though it had been the touch of a scorpion. In that instant my wild, passionate love for her turned to the fiercest loathing.

“‘Randolph,’ she cried, ‘give me one caress to show me that you do not quite hate me—tell me that you love me still!’

“‘You are not playing a part on the stage, madam!’ I cried, with the harshest laugh that ever was heard; ‘this is an act from the drama of real life. Stop—do not come nearer me. Why, I would as soon think of slaying myself, as to offer you—another man’s wife—a caress. My ideas of right and wrong are perhaps a little mixed, but I could never make such a mistake as that. A man who kisses the lips of another man’s wife deserves a sword through his heart—he merits the scorn of all men and the abhorrence of all women.

“‘I am an American, and in my country all honorable men hold other men’s wives sacred and as unapproachable as the stars in heaven. You cannot make a dupe of me, madam. Thank fortune I know you as you are. You would have been a fine wife in whose hands to place a man’s honor! I am thankful that I have escaped you!’

“And without another word I turned on my heel and left her—left her wringing her rose-leaf hands and with

tears on her curling golden lashes. I knew she would soon find another lover to kiss them away. Bah! I would as soon have thought of touching an adder as of touching those pouting red lips again.

"I admit to you frankly that this episode embittered my life. I came near hating all the race of women because of the one I had found false.

"I shall live again all my early dreams of love and a golden future in my thoughts of you, darling," he adds, laughingly, yet looking very tender withal into Aurelia's face; and he puts an arm of resolute possession, bolder than ever poor Gerald Romaine's had been, around her slender figure; and glancing up at him, the girl realizes that this is no puling milk-and-water tenderness of a love-sick, verdant boy, but that it is the strong, passionate love of a world-worn, world-tainted, half world-weary man.

And after that swift glance her white eyelids droop quickly over her dark eyes with a maiden's shyness under the new-known fire of a lover's gaze, and once again the memory of Gerald Romaine stings her heart.

"Let us go back to the house," she says, with a shiver, attempting to break away from the clasp of the strong arm that held her.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave me, precious?" he asks, with eager reproach in his voice. "If these moments were as sweet to you as they are to me you would be in no hurry to end them."

"We shall be missed from the ballroom," she falters, desperately.

He laughs gayly, declaring she would do well if she returned to the ballroom an hour later, and that he was very magnanimous in permitting her to return at all.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALL FOR A WOMAN'S LOVE.

It was not until Aurelia was alone in her room that night that she looked the matter clearly in the face and realized what she had done.

"Was there ever a young girl in the same predica-

ment," she asked herself dubiously, "engaged to two lovers at one and the same time?"

There was no question as to which she liked best, she told herself; she never knew what the throb of love meant until she looked into the dark eyes of Randolph Clavering and read life's meaning there.

There was only one way out of it, and that was to write to Gerald and tell him that she had tried very hard to be true to him, but that it was a failure, that she had found some one else she liked ever so much better, and beg him to consider their betrothal off, for she could not marry him now.

"I may just as well write my letter to Gerald, *now*," she thought, "for there is no such thing as sleep for me to-night."

Aurelia spent three hours in trying to compose a letter to Gerald Romaine, and in the end finished by tearing it up in annoyance. "I *cannot* write it out to him," she cried; "anything written sounds so harsh, so abrupt, so formal. He is such a foolish fellow he might commit suicide, and then it would all come out that I had been engaged to him, and I wouldn't have that happen for the whole world.

"No, I must tell him myself, very gradually and gently, but not now, oh, not now, for he would come here, and—oh—then I should lose Randolph Clavering's love, and I couldn't bear that."

No, she couldn't tell Gerald just yet, and she must write him, to keep him from coming on to Clavering villa; so that night, instead of a letter of dismissal to Gerald, she wrote simply the few words:

"DEAR GERALD,—I'm thinking of you all the time, but be sure not to come here.

"Yours in the greatest haste,

"AURELIA."

"There," she murmured, impatiently flinging the letter from her, "that's the only way I know to avert the catastrophe," and, thinking in a disparaging way of Gerald and his love, Aurelia undresses and creeps into bed.

The sun is high in the heavens when she awakes the next morning. Her first thought is of Randolph Claver-

ing; she wondered if he would speak to his father and mother to-day about what had happened last night. She wondered too, what Miss Erskine would say when she came to know about it.

Aurelia would not have felt very much flattered could she have heard the conversation that was taking place in the library on this very subject at that moment between Randolph Clavering and his parents.

Father and son stood facing each other, and the faces of both were very red and very angry. They were having a decidedly heated discussion; Mrs. Clavering sat on a sofa near the window, her face buried in her lace handkerchief.

"Now mark me, Randolph," Mr. Clavering was saying, "if you take this step you will rue it all the days of your life; you have long since known that it was my earnest desire that you should marry Maud Erskine, my ward; take care how you dare thwart my wishes."

"With all due regard for your authority, I repeat that my mind is made up as to this affair," declared Randolph. "I shall marry Aurelia Lancaster."

"You mean it?" asks his father steadily.

"Decidedly!" answers Randolph, and there is no mistaking the decision in his voice.

"The price of your folly be on your own rash head, then," cries the old gentleman furiously. "I have said that you will rue this step—mark my words!" and in his wrath, Mr. Clavering makes a terrible threat against his son, and strides abruptly from the room, banging the door after him."

"Well, mother," asks Randolph steadily, as he crosses the room, and flings himself down with careless *abandon* on the sofa beside her, "which side do you propose to cleave to—father's—or—mine?"

"Oh, Randolph, if you could but be induced to give Aurelia up," she sobbed, raising his wistful, tear-stained eyes to her son's dark, handsome face, and shivering as she saw it darken.

"This is the one matter in which I will not allow even you to dictate to me, mother," he said shortly.

"Aurelia is all that is beautiful, that I grant you, dear," she replied, laying her hand on his arm, "but a simple country girl is no mate for you, Randolph. Oh,

pause and reflect, before it is too late. Why can you not love Maud Erskine? Think of the great wealth she will come into possession of when she becomes of age; and with such wealth——”

He interrupted her with an indolent wave of his white hand.

“That is rather a foolish line of argument, mother,” he declared. “My future wife’s prospects would be the last thing I should consider. Why should I? I am not marrying for money, but for *love*. I have wealth enough to gratify every desire of my wife.”

Mrs. Clavering turned deadly pale; but Randolph was so intent upon his own thoughts that he did not notice it.

She arose quickly, and with a hurried excuse quitted the library, her face still deadly pale.

A little later, Aurelia, going to the library, is startled to find Randolph there alone.

There is none there save themselves to see, and, lover-like, Randolph springs forward and clasps her to his heart at once, and holds her there, despite her frantic struggles to escape that fervent embrace.

“My darling,” he whispers, “pretend, at least, that you are glad to be here with me, even though in truth you are not.”

“But I *am* glad, Randolph!” she cries, impulsively.

The clasp of his arms tighten. There is a pause, a little brief pause—such moments are all too sweet for words.

At length Randolph breaks the spell.

With one hand he raises the dark, sparkling, piquant face, and looks down into those fathomless, dark, starry eyes.

“My darling,” he whispers fondly, “I have broken the news of our engagement to my mother and father.”

“Did you?” she inquires breathlessly. “Oh, Randolph, what did they say?” and she nestles closer in his embrace.

“Oh, nothing out of the way,” he answers, with a careless shrug of his broad shoulders.

“But were they pleased, Randolph?” she persisted.

“Father was a little wrathful over it,” he replied. “You know he had it all cut and dried, so to speak, that

I should marry the woman of his choosing. He left me in a great huff, declaring he would cut me off without a dollar."

"And will he?" asks Aurelia, quickly, looking up open-eyed, parted-lipped—her grand castles in the air of great wealth, magnificent dresses, glittering diamonds, horses and carriages, falling earthward with a terrible crash. "Will he?" she repeats, breathlessly.

"Why do you ask?" said the young man, sharply.

"It would be so awful—to be—poor, Randolph," she says, shivering, and drawing a long breath.

"I would never have believed that a mercenary thought could enter your brain," he replied, coldly, and his arms slacken their fond hold a little. "You need not be alarmed—he will not disinherit me, for the very excellent reason that he cannot."

But in her presence a cloud cannot rest long on his handsome face.

"I am going to take you out for a drive after breakfast, love," he says. "We must arrange at once for the all-important event which is to give you to me. There is no need of waiting; we may as well be married next week as a fortnight later. Let us forego a houseful of guests, a *trousseau*, and all those auxiliaries so dear, usually, to the feminine heart. With your consent, dear, we will be married at once and go abroad, and then you shall have everything your heart craves that wealth can procure."

"It is so awfully sudden, Randolph," she said.

"Yes; but, as the old adage says, 'delays are dangerous,'" he replied. "I have decided," he went on quickly, "that no time shall be lost in asking your legal guardian, Farmer Romaine, for you. I intend to take a run down there to-morrow. Wish me God speed, my darling."

A sharp cry fell from her lips, and with a suddenness that startled him she sprung from his arms. She dared not think what would happen if he went to Romaine Farm to ask her in marriage—to Romaine Farm where Gerald was. Perhaps it would end in a duel.

In her agitation she went up to him and flung her arms tightly about his neck.

"You must ask no one but myself for me, Randolph,"

she declared. "If you love me as you say you do, you will do what I wish."

"Do not doubt my love, precious," he said tenderly. "I could not love you any better if I tried. I love you with all my heart. Do you hear, Aurelia, darling? I love you with all my heart. What is it you wish me to do, dear?"

"To let the marriage take place without letting any one at the farm know anything about it. Let some one write and tell them after—we—we—are married and far away. That would be so romantic."

She gave him the most bewitching smile any man could receive, and as she raised her face to his, she looked so beautiful, so imploring that he bent his head and kissed her, and after that kiss she was able to persuade him, even against his better judgment, whichever way she would. And that was the first link in the tragedy of three lives.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SWEET, FAIR MARGARET.

AURELIA'S heart beat more tranquilly, now that the promise had been given her by Randolph Clavering that he would not go to Romaine farm; and, now that this difficulty was bridged over, life, which was all rose-tinted with her, moved on smoothly enough.

There was one matter which troubled her not a little, however, and that was, during the week that followed, she received no letter from Gerald Romaine.

Not that this fact, of itself, was of much moment to her; she cared little enough for them, often scanning them over hastily, and tossing them, in shreds, into the waste-basket but half read. But, when day after day passed, and no word came for her, the terror of expecting Gerald at the villa at any time almost drove her mad.

She was just about to write to Margaret, to find out how matters stood, when a letter from the latter was put into her hands.

Tearing open the envelope, Aurelia found that the

white page contained but these few words from her sister:

“Come home at once! Gerald is very ill.

“MARGARET.”

An angry flush burned in Aurelia's cheeks.

“The idea of sending for me to come home just for *that!* as if I could be of any possible use!” she cried, stamping her slippered foot; “and I shall write and tell Margaret so!”

Aurelia lost no time in writing an emphatic refusal to come, but it was not until the next day that her letter reached Romaine farm.

The house was in such a state of turmoil and excitement that, even then, it lay all of that day unopened.

Three days before, directing some of the farm-hands in the fields, Gerald had been stricken down in their midst by sudden illness.

He was conveyed at once to the house.

“It must be the heat of the sun that has overcome him,” said Mrs. Romaine, anxiously. “I will have him taken to the sitting-room—it is nice and cool in there; to-morrow he will be himself again.”

But Margaret, looking at Gerald's white face, did not share the mother's opinion, even though he soon fell into a deep sleep.

Whenever Margaret went near him, he was muttering to himself about Aurelia. His dreams haunted him; he imagined that he was with Aurelia again, but always in some cruel perplexity.

Once Margaret went up to the side of the couch and looked down at him, thinking how his face had changed. It was handsome as ever, but the gay, careless look had gone from it; there was a story in it now—there were deep lines of passion and tenderness that had never been there before.

Margaret knelt down by the couch and watched him in loving silence. His lips parted; he was murmuring in his sleep, and the words ended in a piteous sigh that was like a moan.

“My love,” he whispered—“oh, Aurelia, say one word to me! only one word, my darling!”

Margaret listened with her face buried in her hands.

He moved uneasily in his sleep, and she laid her soft, cool hand on his brow. It was the same half-caress that Aurelia had given him, and, in his fevered sleep, his mind went back to her, and he drew the soft, cool little white hand to his lips, and kissed it fervently.

“Aurelia, my darling!” he murmured faintly.

She did not draw her hand away angrily, as many women would have done; she let it lay in his clasp while he kissed it, believing it to be the hand of her whom he loved so well.

A little later Gerald opened his eyes to consciousness, and found Margaret kneeling beside his couch.

“Oh, Margaret!” he cried despairingly. “I am afraid I am very ill. My head burns, and the blood runs through my veins like fire.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Gerald?” she sobbed.

The blue eyes looked up at her wistfully.

“Yes; send for Aurelia,” he whispered. “I crave her presence so much, ah, so much, Margaret. Will you do it?”

“Yes,” she said gently. “I will write the letter at once, and she will be with us by to-morrow! Let that thought comfort you.”

She could have wept at the great joy that shone in his poor face.

True to her promise, Margaret dispatched her letter at once.

But the next day passed, another, and still another, still Aurelia did not come.

It was pitiful to hear him ask to have the bed moved nearer the window, and to be propped up with pillows, so that he could see the main road that led over the hills to the railway station.

It did not surprise Margaret on the third day of his illness, to find him in a high fever.

“My herb teas and home remedies are useless, Margaret,” sobbed Mrs. Romaine. “I yield to your pleadings; we must send for the doctor.”

When the doctor came and looked into his patient's face, he started back with a low cry, and hurried Margaret quickly from the room, commanding her to enter the room no more.

When he found himself alone with Mrs. Romaine, he turned to her gravely.

“You did wrong in not sending for medical attendance at once,” he said. “Your son has a complication of diseases, either of which might prove fatal. He has now small-pox in its most aggravated form, and if he recovers from that, it will settle into brain fever, the symptoms of which are also discernible. Do not let that fair young girl, whom I found by the bedside, nurse him, now that you know the nature of his disease—send her away from the farm.”

Mrs. Romaine’s bitter sobs brought tears to the eyes of the old doctor, used as he was to scenes of sorrow.

Margaret had gone into the next apartment when the doctor had dismissed her so summarily from the room. After he had left the house, she stole hurriedly back to Mrs. Romaine, who stood by the bedside like a marble statue, looking down into Gerald’s face, and flung herself with clasped hands on her knees before her.

“I have heard all, Aunt Rachel,” she sobbed. “Do not send me away. In the hour of trouble and danger, let me be here with you to comfort you and help bear your burden. No one can nurse Gerald as faithfully as I will do. I—I—would give my life—yes—my—life—to save his.”

The heart-broken mother clasped the girl to her bosom, her tears falling like rain on the beautiful, white, up-turned face.

“You are an angel, Margaret,” she sobbed. “I cannot accept the sacrifice, dear, at such a terrible risk to yourself. You must go quickly, dear; every moment you spend in this room is at a deadly risk. For the love of Heaven, go, Margaret.”

“I *cannot* go while Gerald is so ill,” replied the girl firmly. “I could not endure the torturing fear that he might be neglected in any way while you were away from his bedside. In mercy let me stay and attend him!”

Mrs. Romaine could not withstand the girl’s pleadings, and against her better judgment, consented to permit Margaret to remain and take her place by Gerald’s bedside. Even the doctor, when he returned again and

found her there, was not proof against her earnest entreaties.

“You are a noble young woman,” he said admiringly. “Would to Heaven there were more like you. I can only hope that you will not rue this step; you are so fair of face it would be a thousand pities to see you under the blight of the disease your patient has, and your beauty gone—forever. Do you realize your risk, child? have you given it serious thought?”

She smiled a rare, sweet smile up into his face. “I leave myself in God’s hands,” she said simply, and the doctor turned away that she might not see the tears that had gathered in his eyes.

“The noblest, grandest woman I have ever met,” he mused as he drove along over the country road, and his hard, grim, bachelor heart grew strangely tender. “If I had known such a woman as that, life might have gone differently with me in my early days. I might have had home, wife and children. Heigho! how foolish I am to allow myself to yearn all at once for these things now;” and even though he said that, he bowed his head and wept at the thought that when his last hour would come, it would be the hand of strangers that held a cup of water to his lips; no one would shed a tear for him, his memory would be kept green in no loving heart, no childish hands would plant roses over his grave, the money he had hoarded and made a god of would go to endow public institutions for the benefit of people who had never known him and who cared still less about who or what he had been, so long as they reaped the harvest of the gold he had toiled so hard and so patiently to accumulate.

Dr. Thorpe looked long and earnestly at his face reflected in the mirror, when he reached his lodgings that day.

His hair which had once been so dark and luxuriant, was now heavily streaked with silver threads; he noted it—and for the first time in his life—with bitter regret. The dark eyes were faded, and the marks of time, which had dealt none too kindly with him, had seamed his face with unsightly lines under the eyes and about the mouth. He certainly looked every hour of his nine-and-forty years.

“It is too late to hope for love *now*,” he sighed. “No woman would love me, for myself. I must not allow my mind to indulge in foolish fancies over what might have been, or to think of sweet Margaret Lancaster; she can never be anything to me—never! But ah!—Heaven help me—how it would please me to know that she might think of me, even after I am gone.”

Suddenly a strange idea came to him, and he did not put it from him, but mused over it until at last it became his constant thought, and that thought was:

“In the hour that I lie dying, I shall leave all the wealth I have accumulated to Margaret Lancaster,” and the idea grew upon him as the days glided by.

CHAPTER XXV.

HER PITIFUL LOVE-STORY.

ALTHOUGH Dr. Thorpe did all in his power for his patient, Gerald Romaine grew steadily worse, and, for a time, Margaret almost forgot Aurelia in her fear for Gerald.

As the long days and nights passed, and the danger increased, Mrs. Romaine aged terribly. The upright figure grew bent and stooping; the gray hair turned white; deep furrows came into the pale forehead, her whole, sole prayer was for her son's life.

Margaret never forgot those days, the breathless suspense, the fear, the earnestness with which the unhappy mother would follow her about from room to room, saying always the same thing.

“Never mind trying to comfort me, Margaret, pray for Gerald, my poor boy.”

There came a day when the doctor said he feared no human means could save Gerald Romaine—when the white-haired mother fell upon her knees, crying loudly to Heaven to spare her son. In this hour of terrible trial she besieged Heaven, as it were, for her son's life,—even the angels, who knelt around the Great White Throne, must have wept for her, if they heard her, and pitied her anguish—even Margaret shrunk from her wild words.

“Let me suffer, my God!” she cried, “but spare my only son! Send me torture and death—but let him live! I would give my body to be burned—my heart to be riven—only spare him; oh, God! only spare him!”

At this crisis in Gerald's condition, Margaret came across Aurelia's letter, which until now had remained unopened—forgotten.

With a troubled face she read it through, marveling much at Aurelia's refusal to come to Gerald, even with the knowledge that he was ill unto death.

Suddenly an inspiration came to her. If she could go to Deephurst—to Clavering Villa, perhaps she could persuade Aurelia to return with her at once—and Aurelia's presence might save Gerald's life. For, even now in the height of his delirium, he still watched the door with an intentness and pitiful expectancy that only she understood.

That morning she announced her intention of going to Deephurst for a day to see Aurelia.

“You should stay away a fortnight,” said Dr. Thorpe, laying his hand kindly on the girl's fair head; “you are breaking yourself down completely, my child. You will be the next patient I'll have on my hands if you are not careful. Yes, go, by all means.”

But before Margaret started Dr. Thorpe took the precaution of ascertaining that there was no taint of the fatal disease about her to spread contagion elsewhere.

It was dusk when Margaret reached Deephurst. It was three miles to Clavering Villa, and as her purse was light, she concluded to walk the distance.

By inquiry she soon found out in which direction the Clavering estate lay, and set out for her destination with a hopeful heart as to the result she had to accomplish.

When she came in sight of the place, she looked in wonder at the magnificence that greeted her eye at every turn—the towering stone structure, with its gables and turrets, in the center of the grounds, peeping out through the trees that half screened it from the main road. The white marble statuettes gleamed in the bright moonlight, and the tinkling of the fountain mingled with the drowsy chirping of the crickets, made pleasant music on the still night air.

Some one had left the ponderous gate ajar. Margaret pushed it open and entered the grounds.

There were three gravel walks before her; she could not see, on account of the trees, which one of them led to the house. She struck into the one toward the left, hurrying rapidly onward.

Margaret did not see the tall young man standing in the shadow of the trees, near one of the fountains, who was so near her when she passed that he could have put out his hand and touched her.

“Now who is this young girl?” Randolph Clavering asked himself in wonder; “and why does she steal into the grounds at this hour? I must warn her against taking the left walk; for, a little further on they are digging the pit for the seal pond; she will be into it before she knows it; then there would be a broken limb or a broken back. I must tell her to take the center walk to go to the house.”

And away Randolph Clavering hurried after her, not calling to her lest he should frighten her, and thinking he could easily overtake her ere she reached the dangerous locality.

As Margaret turned an abrupt curve in the path, she suddenly stopped short, with a glad cry—directly before her, coming leisurely down the path, was Aurelia. In an instant she was beside Aurelia, and her arms were about her, and she was kissing the beautiful face.

“Gracious goodness! where in the world did you come from, Margy?” cried Aurelia, as soon as she could catch her breath and disentangle herself from the arms that held her. “I was just thinking of you, and I actually believe you sprung suddenly out of the ground to confront me—as the witches do.”

Margaret smiled faintly.

“But what in the world brings you here?” Aurelia went on. “And what a fright you look in that brown-stuff gown, and coarse shoes, and plain bonnet—just like a country dowdy! You came here like that just on purpose to disgrace me before these fine people, because you thought I was having a good time—you know you did.”

And two very angry tears brimmed over from

Aurelia's flashing eyes, and rolled down her flushed cheeks.

"I had no such purpose in view, dear," answered Margaret, deeply distressed. "I wonder that you can think so ill of me—I was in such a hurry to come to you that I never once thought of my dress and how plain I should appear."

"But what did you come here for, anyway?" persisted Aurelia.

"To tell you about Gerald, dear," sobbed Margaret.

"Well, don't make a scene," returned Aurelia, sharply. "Here, come into the arbor where no one can see us or hear us talk."

And grasping Margaret's arm, she hurried her along the path until the arbor was reached.

It was intensely dark within it, save for the beams of moonlight that drifted in through the broad leaves, and lay in grotesque white patches on the paved floor.

"Now, what is it about Gerald Romaine?" she exclaimed, angrily, as she pushed Margaret into a rustic seat, and flung herself beside her. "No doubt he sent you here to worry me into writing twenty letters a day to him—or perhaps he had the silly notion that you could coax me back to the farm because he had a headache; and I should think that he really would have, tinkering with those senseless patents of his. I——"

Margaret listened in shocked surprise.

"My darling," she broke in, tearfully, "do not talk like that, you pain me, indeed you do. Gerald is very, very ill. Oh, listen, Aurelia—so ill that his life is despaired of. Every means to save him has been exhausted, he is rapidly sinking. But one hope is left—if *you* come to him, you might arouse him from the stupor into which he has fallen—you alone could do it—if that failed, then he is indeed lost to us forever. Oh, Aurelia—forever!"

"Don't ask me to go, Margy," cried Aurelia, shuddering, "you know how I abhor sick-rooms; I couldn't do anything for Gerald if I were there."

"Yes, you could," sobbed Margaret. "You could go up to him, and kneel down beside his bed, clasp his hands and say to him, 'I am here, Gerald, I—Aurelia, your promised wife, whom you love so well;' say that,

and I am sure he will hear and recognize you—his love for you is so great. Oh, Aurelia, you would not hesitate to come if you could hear how he calls for you, morning, noon, and all through the long night. It makes my heart bleed to hear him. I repeat—you are his promised wife—your place is by his side in this dreadful ordeal. I wonder that I have to remind you of your duty—to come to him, and comfort, and nurse him.”

“It is a wonder that you do not comfort him, Margy,” sneered Aurelia.

The gasping breath that Margaret drew was plainly audible all through the rose-arbor. For a moment she was silent—at length, in a husky voice, she answered slowly:

“Would to Heaven I *could* comfort him, Aurelia. If my life could be given to save Gerald’s, only God and the angels know how quickly, and gladly, I would give it.”

“It’s a pity such great devotion as yours should not have won Gerald Romaine’s love,” retorted Aurelia contemptuously. “I’ll give him to you in welcome, Margy; I see you love him.”

“I beg that you will not jest upon such a matter, Aurelia,” replied Margaret, her sweet, earnest voice quivering with pain.

“See,” she cried, flinging herself before her scornful sister, “I beg of you on my knees to come to Gerald, to save his life; for *my* sake come. Kneeling here I will tell you of the bitter sorrow that has darkened my life—and *you* caused it; but I will bless you even as I have forgiven you all, long ago, if you will but come and save Gerald’s life by your presence.

“Before Gerald saw you—that is, before your return from boarding-school—Gerald Romaine was *my* love; I was to have been his wife, Aurelia, and the day was set for the wedding.

“Oh, Aurelia, let me tell you in a few words. Let me dwell for a few brief moments on that one gleam of sunshine in my life. Let me tell you how happy I was; how sweet were my hopes of a happy home all my own, with Gerald there to love me. I believed in his love, in his loyalty and faith, as I did in Heaven itself. I—I—could have knelt at his feet and blindly worshiped him.

My only fault was, that I loved Gerald too well. I sometimes think that is why Heaven took him from me, for in the great book it is written: 'Thou shalt have no other God but me.'

"Now listen, mark well, Aurelia, the sequel to my pitiful love story.

"My life might have been happy enough," continued Margaret, "if you had not crossed Gerald's path, Aurelia, for, from the first moment he looked upon your face, he loved you with a love that was his doom—and mine.

"How can I tell you what happened after—tell you how he knelt at my feet one day and asked me for his freedom, that he might marry you, whom he had learned to love, he said, as he had never loved me, and never could love me?

"All in a moment, my idol, like my beautiful dreams, lay in ruins around me. My heart seemed to break then and there with one great, awful throb. I wished that I could fall down dead before him, but death would not come to me.

"Only Heaven and the witnessing angels know the bitterness of the moment in which I turned to him and said:

"'God pity me!—I set you free, Gerald, if it must be so!'

"I lived through it somehow, forced as I was to witness from day to day his fond devotion to you. I lived and suffered in silence.

"Oh, Aurelia, how I would have thanked Heaven for the smallest portion of the love Gerald Romaine has lavished upon you.

"Now he lies dying, and I am here pleading with you who has come between his love and me, to come to him and save the life that I would be willing to give every drop of my heart's blood to prolong. See, Aurelia, I am pleading to you—Gerald's betrothed wife—on my knees, to come to him!"

Aurelia had listened to Margaret's story with open-eyed amazement; but instead of feeling sorry for the fair-haired sister kneeling in such bitter sorrow before her, a thrill of something very like triumph shot through her heart, that she could with a single smile, win the love which Margaret would gladly pay her life for.

“You have not told me what is the matter with Gerald, Margy,” she said impatiently.

“It is that most heart-rending of all diseases—small-pox!”

A shriek of horror broke from Aurelia’s lips.

“Are you mad!” she cried, as soon as she could catch her breath. “You *must* be to ask me to go near Gerald Romaine with that horrid disease! Why, I wouldn’t go within a mile of the house for the whole world—not I! You don’t seem to consider, Margy, that if I should go to him and catch it, I should be marked for life—my beauty would be ruined.”

“What is beauty when weighed in the balance with a human life!” cried Margaret. “Go to him, and by the power of the love he has for you, I feel sure your presence will save him!”

“Then he will die for the want of it,” declared Aurelia; “for, coax as hard as you may, I refuse to go. The loss of *your* good looks may be nothing to *you*, but to *me* such a catastrophe would mean death in life! We only reign in the hearts of men while our beauty lasts. Rest assured I shall not rush headlong to ruin mine! And moreover,” cried Aurelia, wrathfully, “I never want to see Gerald Romaine again—living or dead! Take that message back to him from me! Here, hand him back this ring. That was our engagement-ring, and tell him I am done with him forever—that I am tired of the bonds that fettered me to him, and I throw them off! Break it to him as you like, Margaret; then, perhaps you will have the satisfaction of seeing the lover whom you still adore turn to you for consolation and sympathy. Tell him,” Aurelia went on, with an eldritch laugh that resounded weirdly through the rose-arbor, “that I have found another lover richer and handsomer. A man who has not his wealth to earn by his hands or his brains, but who has it already, and who can get everything for me that my heart craves. Tell him I shall be a grand lady, and——”

“I can hear no more,” cried Margaret; “I will not believe that all you say is true.”

“You will find that it is all true enough very soon now. I did not mean to let Gerald or any of the rest of you

know about it until I was married and away, but you have forced the truth from my lips."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"GERALD ROMAINÉ'S PROMISED WIFE IS NOTHING TO ME."

"THEN you refuse absolutely to come to Gearld?" asked Margaret, slowly.

"Don't you understand plain English when you hear it?" retorted Aurelia, furiously. "I said I wouldn't go under any consideration—under—any—consid-er-a-tion."

"Then my mission here is useless. I will urge you no more," replied Margaret, turning sadly away from her sister.

"Are you going back to-night?" asked Aurelia, quickly.

"Yes," said Margaret; "I am needed there."

Aurelia breathed freer. She was very glad that none of the Claverings would see Margaret or even know of her visit.

For the first time in her life gentle Margaret Lancaster parted in bitter anger from her beautiful sister.

Aurelia watched the slim figure flit down the moonlit path and through the ponderous gate—watched her until the distance and the shadows took her in their embrace, and she was lost to sight. Aurelia never dreamed in that hour under what circumstances she was destined to meet Margaret again.

"It was as well to tell her the whole truth about my intention of giving Gerald up, first as last," she murmured. "And Margaret can break it to him more gently than I could on paper.

"Oh, but I had almost forgotten what brought me out here in the moonlight. Randolph said that he would be out in the grounds and wanted to talk to me."

She knew where to look for him, and throwing off all thought of the disagreeable scene through which she had just passed, Aurelia hurried to the other part of the grounds, where she expected to find him pacing up and

down impatiently enough, smoking his cigar under the trees, but he was not there.

She sits down on a bench in the moonlight and waits a little. Suddenly she hears a man's quick, firm tread on the graveled walk, and hurries forward to meet him, stopping for an instant to break off a white rose-bud from one of the tall bushes.

"Isn't it lovely, Randolph?" she cries, holding it out to him as he approached—"it is for you."

Not speaking, he takes the little hand—flower and all—and looks into her face; and then, as if yielding to a temptation that he hates, that he would fain resist, but which masters him, strong as he is, he snatches her to his breast and kisses her fiercely—eyelids, lips and neck—with a violence that he is himself scarcely conscious of.

"Randolph," she cries, "you are actually crushing me. Don't be so vehement."

He recollected himself instantly and released her.

"It is alarming, being kissed—especially when you are not used to it," he answers, with a sneer that cuts through Aurelia's heart like a knife.

She raised her head from his breast, and looked up at him quickly. Was it the moonlight that gave his face such a white, wrathful look? How fiercely—yes, fiercely—the dark eyes met and held her own.

"What is the matter, Randolph?" she asked quickly. "Something has happened—what is it, dear?"

"It does not amount to much, I fancy," he replied, with a little bitter laugh. "It is only that I have heard a startling bit of news."

"What is it?" she inquired quickly, all her curiosity aroused at once.

"Only that an acquaintance of mine is engaged to be married."

"Is it any one I know?" asked Aurelia, greatly interested.

"I imagine you know her a trifle better than most people do," he replied, cynically, twisting the curling ends of his dark mustache impatiently with his white fingers, a habit he had when deeply agitated.

"Who is it?" persisted Aurelia. "Not Miss Erskine, surely."

"No! yourself," he responded, sharply.

She sprung back from him with a gay little laugh.

“Of course I am to be married, am I not?—and to you, Randolph,” she said, coyly. “Our engagement is no news.”

He reaches forward and grasps her white arm.

“I want you to answer me this—I want it from your own lips, that I may be sure that the story I have heard did not deceive my ears—what was Gerald Romaine, the farmer’s son, to you? I want the truth.”

The blow had fallen upon her so suddenly, so sharply, and without an instant’s warning, that it fairly staggered her—fairly took her breath away, rendering her speechless.

“I repeat,” said Randolph Clavering, sternly, “was Gerald Romaine, the farmer’s son, ever anything to you?”

“I was once betrothed to him,” she faltered, under her breath.

“How long ago—was it broken off?” he asks sternly.

“It was never broken off, but I—I was intending to write to him this very night, and tell him it could never be now,” she answers, in a frightened whisper, adding, incoherently: “how did—you—know about it—Randolph?”

“We will get to that presently,” he said, harshly; and as he spoke his face gathered blackness. “Let me understand this clearly before I answer you,” he cried. “Were you betrothed to this young Romaine at the time you accepted me?”

She was too completely startled to deny it, and she answered:

“Yes.”

“You were good enough to overlook such a trifling obstacle—that you were another’s—when you permitted me to pour into your willing ear my love for you, were you not?”

“I never thought of him in that hour,” she faltered, and her guilty head sunk down on her breast, as a flower’s head sinks, tortured by a strong wind.

But she suddenly lifts her face, and he sees tears in the lovely eyes; but the sight of her tears do not soften his rage.

His straight brows are drawn together in one dark line

across his face, and his lips look white and thin under his mustache.

"I believe every false woman has a penchant for crossing my path!" he cried grimly. "With your treachery, I forswear all faith in the race," and having said this, he turned to leave her.

"Randolph," she whispered, "do you mean that—that—we are to part? You *could* not mean that? Ah, no——"

"Your intuition serves you well," he replied grimly. "Certainly we are to part. Gerald Romaine's promised bride—is nothing to me!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

"IT WAS ONLY A FLIRTATION."

FOR a moment there was deep silence. Randolph Clavering looked at Aurelia out of the corners of his eyes.

She had hidden her face in her hands, but by the panting breast and heaving shoulders, so plainly discernible through their covering of soft white mull, he saw that she was weeping, that a storm of sobs was shaking her slender frame.

"Let me tell you all about it, Randolph," she faltered.

"Thanks, I understand the affair perfectly," he declared, in an icy voice, his eyes flashing with a hard, metallic glitter. "You thought a rich man a better investment than a poor one. You threw the other fellow over for me. If another man crossed your path to-morrow richer than myself, he would be the winner and I the loser, if he were to sue for your hand. From a woman who could throw a man over with the cold-blooded heartlessness you have done, I thank Heaven for escaping. I should like to ask one question," he went on icily; "seeing that you did not break with your other lover yet, according to your story, did you intend to marry both of us?"

Aurelia could not stand this cruel flaunt.

"Do you think it manly to stand there and—and—in-

sult me because I have been fool enough to give up a man who loved me as you could never have loved me—for *you?*”

Randolph Clavering stands motionless in the moonlight, and looks at her; a spasm passes over his features, contracting and puckering them; his hands clinch themselves in the mightiness of his effort to control his bitter anger.

“That is easily remedied,” he answered haughtily. “Why should you not go back to Gerald Romaine, the farmer’s son, as you left him—his betrothed wife. There is no reason why he should ever hear of this *episode*, this *interlude*, this *farce!*”

“But I—I don’t love him as I love *you*, Randolph,” she pants, sobbing as though her heart would break. “Oh, why won’t you believe me?”

He laughed harshly.

“A thing must be probable, or at least possible, before I can give credence to it,” he answered. “A faith once broken can never be mended. A woman who has deceived a man once for one object, may deceive him a second time for another. If I were to marry you now,” he went on, his words coming quicker, and his emotion deepening as he proceeded, “although I love you madly, I should always disbelieve in you. I should be on the lookout for treachery from you. I should never press your heart to mine without fearing that it was beating for some one else.”

The acknowledgment that he still loved her madly, brought hope surging back to Aurelia’s breast.

“If you cared for me, you would not want me to go back to Gerald Romaine,” she sobbed. “You could not contemplate so nonchalantly seeing me in another man’s possession.”

“What right have I to covet the betrothed wife of another?” he cried sternly. “I have no right to steal Gerald Romaine’s promised bride any more than I could steal without compunction of conscience his horse or his money. You have ruined my life in coming here and teaching me to love you, but I am man enough to live through it. I leave the villa to-night. Good-bye.”

And he turns his head sharply, and only the stars see

the distortion of the anguish of parting from her that is working on his face.

“Are we going to part like this, Randolph, after all that has passed?” she falters in a tremulous voice that might tempt an anchorite, unman a hero. “Oh, Randolph, say that you forgive me for not telling you all on that—that night that we stood by the fountain and you asked me—to—to marry—you.”

“Why should I say that which is not true?” he asked, turning bitterly toward her. “I don’t forgive you, and never shall, either in this world or the next. Good-bye!”

He felt the strain was too great for him, if this leave-taking were to last much longer; being but human, he would break down under it. By a superhuman effort he has refrained from catching her in his arms and crying out to her:

“My love is so strong I cannot give you up, darling. If there were ten thousand Gerald Romaines between us, and ten thousand treacheries, I must be yours, and you must be mine!”

But his strong will battles down this yearning for her.

He is not sure of himself another instant in her presence; and, without another glance at the face dearer to him than all the world beside, he turns on his heel and walks rapidly away—not toward the house, but toward the entrance-gate that opens out on the main road, and is soon lost to sight among the trees.

Aurelia never knew how long she sat there in the cold, white moonlight.

All that had just passed seemed to her like a confused dream, from which she must awake presently; she could not realize that all was over between Randolph Claverling and herself—that the wealth she had been so near winning had floated like a bubble out of her reach; she could not grasp the thought that she had indeed lost the golden prize—the haughty, dark-eyed, handsome, adoring lover whom other women coveted with such bitter envy.

Oh, no, no, no! it could not be real that she had lost him.

Sitting there, she thought of the lines she had heard

Miss Erskine reading aloud to Randolph only that morning, and interlarding each line with sentimental sighs as she went along.

The words came back to Aurelia with a strange, cold thrill now.

“Where two roads part we sadly stray,
Here turn we each our lonely way—
The paths marked out for us by Fate.
In vain to longer idly wait,
Or hope for further sweet delay.
I see with sorrow and dismay
That your path stretches far away
From mine—that now we separate
Where two roads part.

“With aching heart I humbly pray
That once again our life-paths may,
Through mazes strange and intricate,
Each other cross ere 'tis too late,
And Fate be kinder than to-day—
Where two roads part.”

Did her path stretch away from Randolph Claver-
ing's?

She could not—would not, believe it.

Then Aurelia fell to idly wondering who had told Randolph about Gerald Romaine, and how the calamity had happened.

One by one she saw the lights go out in the upper windows of the villa; that recalled her scattered senses.

It was late—she must go into the house, she told herself.

Now she crept wearily up the broad path she had so lately danced over.

She looked at the magnificent granite mansion, bathed in the glory of the white moonlight; at the parks that surrounded it, stretching away as far as the eye could reach on all sides, and she sobbed aloud at the thought of losing it all.

How could she leave all this grandeur and return to the farm and marry Gerald Romaine? she asked herself, wringing her hands hysterically. She couldn't—she couldn't, she declared wildly, below her breath; it would be death in life. She had too keen an appreciation of luxury to throw herself away on a poor man. It would break her heart.

Aurelia crept up to her room that night with the most miserable heart that ever beat in a girl's bosom.

She knew Randolph Clavering too well to hope that he might change his mind. That night, for the first time in her bright, gay, rose-leaf life, Aurelia Lancaster knew what it meant to weep herself to sleep.

It was late the next morning when she awoke; she hardly knew her own face when she looked at it in the mirror. There was no color in the dimpled cheeks, or the daintily curved lips—and there were great dark circles under the dark, silken lashes.

Dressing herself with cold, trembling hands, Aurelia descended at length to the breakfast-room. Mrs. Clavering and her husband were lingering late over their chocolate. Aurelia's heart sunk when she saw them still at the table—she had hoped to escape them.

It looked suspiciously as though they had waited purposely to see her, she thought, and she wondered if Randolph had told them anything about what had happened the night before. She was soon to know.

Both glanced up at her furtively as she took her seat, and they exchanged morning greetings, in their usual fashion.

“You were not up in time, my dear, to see Randolph off,” said Mrs. Clavering, sweetly. “He requested me to say ‘good-bye,’ to you for him.”

“He—has—really—gone—then?” faltered the girl, slowly—chokingly.

“He left at seven this morning,” replied Mrs. Clavering. “My dear”—she went on in a low voice—“he told me, too, that all was over between you and him—I am sorry. My husband was sorry too,” she added, taking a swift glance at her husband, as though mutely appealing to him to corroborate the statement, and taking the cue from her, Mr. Clavering murmured a few polite, inarticulate words which Aurelia did not quite catch.

There could not have been a more trying situation for the girl; but she was equal to the occasion; she crushed back the burning tears from her eyes, and summoned up all her pride—forcing a smile to her lips.

“What you are pleased to term an engagement between Randolph and myself, I have only considered nothing more nor less than a flirtation,” she declared,

laughing with all the gay, happy *abandon* of a merry schoolgirl. "Randolph insisted that you would imagine us really lovers, but I knew you would never make such a ridiculous mistake."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Clavering looked at Aurelia in amazement.

They both knew how much in earnest their son had been in his intention of braving their anger by marrying this girl. Could it be possible that now, after all—she would not have him? Was this the secret of this sudden leave-taking?

This condition of affairs was rather a blow to their pride—still, no matter how it came about, they were delighted at the issue—he was free. And the hope beat high in their breasts that his heart might, in the rebound, turn to the object of their selection—Maud Erskine.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BACK FROM THE PORTALS OF THE TOMB.

UNDER the existing circumstances, Aurelia knew that it would be best to draw her visit to a close without delay; and before she left the breakfast-table she acquainted Mr. and Mrs. Clavering of her intended departure.

There were the usual polite regrets; then Mrs. Clavering inquired when they were to lose her, and Aurelia replied that she must start for home the following morning.

Of course they expostulated; but Aurelia knew that deep down in their hearts they would not be very ill-pleased when she went.

The hardest task of all for Aurelia was to meet Maud Erskine that day.

The moment she met the glance of Maud's green-blue, triumphant eyes, she realized that she knew all.

Even she was puzzled at the bright face Aurelia assumed.

"It is only some lovers' quarrel that they have had that has sent Randolph off in a rage," she thought. "He will soon return, and, finding her gone back to her home,

he will follow her there, and they will make up and marry."

It was not until Aurelia was on the train, and it had moved out of sight of those who had come down to the depot with her to see her safely started on her journey, that she gave way to her despair.

Every mile they traversed brought her nearer the hated farm and the old life.

So great was her abhorrence of it that she felt like flinging herself bodily from the train.

She was in doubt, too, as to how she would be received if Margaret had delivered her message to Gerald. Where should she go, then—which way should she turn?

As they were not expecting Aurelia, there was no one at the station to meet her.

The son of a neighboring farmer took her to her destination.

It was dusk when she reached the farm. Already the lamp had been lighted, and shone with a ruddy glow athwart the path that led to the front door.

The curtains of Gerald's apartment had been closely drawn; but she could see the shadows of dark forms flitting to and fro across the room.

"Was he worse?" she wondered.

Feeling very much like an intruder, Aurelia turned the knob of the door and entered softly.

Some one was seated by the window—her face resting on the sill—her form shaking with suppressed sobs. At the first glance Aurelia knew who she was, and called to her, softly:

"Margaret! Margaret!"

The girl lifted her head with a quick start, and saw her standing there; in a moment she was beside her—her arms flung tightly about her neck—the tear-swollen cheek pressed close to her own.

"Oh, Aurelia," she sobbed, "I knew you would come! I believed it from the very bottom of my soul. He is worse; I did not give him your message; I could not, and he so ill, and calling for you with every fluttering, feeble breath. But now," she added, hopefully, "he will be saved; you will draw him back from the very

borders of the other world. Come to him quickly, dear—every moment is precious.”

“Who is with Gerald now?” asked Aurelia, drawing back as they reached the door—“his mother?”

Margaret shook her head.

“No, she is in her own room,” she answered. “I begged her to lie down and rest a little, but she would not; so, out of sheer pity, the good old doctor administered a sleeping potion to her in her tea. She sleeps the sleep of exhaustion. The doctor left some little time since, promising to be with us again shortly, but—he—he—told me that his presence would be unavailing—for nothing more, within human power, could be done for Gerald.

“Oh, Aurelia, I could not endure it—sitting by his bedside and hearing him call on you to come to him—without weeping, and—and I went from his bedside that he might not see my tears.”

Margaret pushed open the door softly, and the two girls stood on the threshold.

“Enter—alone—it is best so,” whispered Margaret, adding: “Call me when you want me.”

Aurelia heard the door close softly after her, and knew she was standing alone, in the presence of the man she would have so wantonly destroyed if fate had not taken the power from her.

She advanced toward the couch timidly, and with trembling hands drew aside the heavy curtains from it, and the light from the shaded night-lamp fell with a softened glow on the white face on the pillow.

“Aurelia,” murmured the sufferer, wearily, as he moved his arms restlessly about, “are you *never* coming, dear? Oh, love, if you knew how patiently I have waited for you.”

Aurelia took off her hat and sack, and drew her chair close up to the bedside and sat down.

Oh, how changed he was—handsome still, but sadly changed; and, even sitting there, holding his hands clasped in hers, no impulse stirred in her heart to bend over him and kiss the lips that called on her name so earnestly.

Of course she hoped he would recover—but with the thought came another—that in that case she would in all

probability have to marry him, and a heavy sigh broke from her lips.

The sigh awoke him; he opened his eyes with a start, murmuring her name.

"I am here, Gerald," she murmured, faintly.

He held out his arms to her, with a passionate cry:

"Aurelia—thank God, you have come to me—at last."

Gerald raised his dim eyes to the lovely face of the girl he worshiped so madly, and tears filled them; a low moan broke from his lips.

He held her hands clasped tightly, looking at her with an expression—wistful and appealing—that she never forgot.

"I am dying, dear," he whispered, huskily, "but my soul would not leave its mortal tenement until you came to me—so great is the love I bear you. Bend your sweet face nearer, precious, that I may see you; I can die content now that you are with me.

"Oh, Aurelia, how I wish that I could take you across the dark river of death with me. It almost seems that I cannot die and leave you here."

Even at the portals of the tomb the ruling passion of his life held its own.

"Oh, Aurelia," he murmured, "you will never realize how dearly I have loved you—loved you with all my heart and soul—idolized you. The words I use to express it seem cold. Ah! how I wish they could burn their way to your very soul!"

The very vehemence of his passionate, worshipful adoration startled her—a very flame of love seemed to glow in his face.

He looked at the beautiful little hands, white as lily leaves, which he held.

"Oh, little hands that hold my heart!" he sighed. "Do you remember how I kissed these hands, Aurelia, on the day you promised to be my wife? kissed them with my whole soul in each burning kiss, knowing they were mine—all mine."

A guilty shiver shot through her heart; she made an effort to draw her hands from his grasp, but he held them the tighter. She tried to speak—to stem the torrent of words that broke from his lips—she might as

well have tried to beat back the waves of the mighty ocean.

“Oh, my love,” he sighed, “listen to me: Some men have many loves; I love but you. Some men have worshiped many fair faces; I never knew what real love meant until I looked into yours, and worshiped you. In you were centered all my hopes, my ambitions, and dreams of a brilliant future!”

The pathos that trembled in his voice and shone in his eyes could not help but touch her, false and fickle though she was.

Alas! that such a wealth of love should have been lavished upon her all in vain.

“Oh, Aurelia,” he went on, “will you think of me when I am gone? Will you come to my grave, and, as you kneel there, remember the words I am saying to you now? The heart that beats with a love surpassing all others will lie cold and still; but you will remember, my darling, that in life it beat only for you, my own true love—my love who was so soon to have been my wife.”

“Don’t, Gerald, don’t!” she sobbed, “I cannot bear it!”

Every word he uttered was like the sharp blade of a dagger in her heart.

The words on her lips were arrested just then by the entrance of the doctor, Mrs. Romaine, and Margaret.

Dr. Thrope’s surprise and fear were great at seeing a young and beautiful girl sitting by Gerald Romaine’s bedside. He hurried forward in the greatest of alarm, but Margaret laid a detaining hand on his arm.

“She is my sister, and Gerald’s betrothed bride; she knows all about the disease, and does not fear it. Her place is at his bedside,” she said.

Hearing this the doctor offered no remonstrance to Aurelia’s presence there; still he looked greatly troubled. But, as he approached the bed, and bent over his patient, his face cleared, and a cry of surprise broke from his lips.

“Mrs. Romaine,” he said, turning quickly to the weeping mother, “there is a decided change for the better in your son; I think he will live.”

Margaret echoed Mrs. Romaine’s great, glad cry, and

she flung herself at Aurelia's feet, with her face buried in her hands.

"I knew it, dear," she murmured, brokenly, "you have drawn Gerald back from the dark valley of the shadow of death by your presence—back to life and the world from which he was slipping."

"After a good deep sleep he will awaken refreshed," said the doctor. "For the first time during his illness his mind seems to be perfectly at rest; see, he has dropped into a peaceful slumber, with a smile on his lips."

Mrs. Romaine could not find words to thank God for His mercy, her heart was so full of gratitude.

Who is it that says, "a prayer granted is sometimes a curse?"

The time was coming when those who loved Gerald Romaine best would say it was the greatest pity that he had not died in this illness; he would then have died with his mother's hope of heaven infolding him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"IF YOU THROW ME OFF, TOO, WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME?"

GERALD ROMAINÉ improved so rapidly that he was able to leave his bed in three weeks' time, and in six to join the family at the table.

To the great relief of the doctor, and thanks to his great precautions, the ravages of the dread disease that had hovered over the farm, commenced and ended with Gerald.

"It was fate, certainly, that spared me and my beauty," Aurelia would often remark crossly enough to her sister.

But Margaret would answer thankfully that it was Heaven's mercy.

Owing to the excellent nursing Gerald had received, the doctor's prophecy from the first came true: that he would not be marked for life; and only a few faint scars over the temple, which promised in time to wear away, were visible on his pale, handsome face.

His great delight was sitting under the trees in the old orchard, with Aurelia near him.

"I shall soon be strong enough to commence work on my patents again," he declared one day. "I feel impatient doing nothing all the live long day. Being an idler is the hardest work an ambitious man can find to do. Even in my illness, dear, when my thoughts were not on you, they were busily working on those patents——"

"I am tired and sick of hearing of them," declared Aurelia, abruptly. "I don't believe you will ever make a cent out of them."

"Aurelia!" he said gravely, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder.

She shook off his hand, and turned away from the startled gaze of the pained blue eyes regarding her so intently.

"Aurelia," he continued, catching his breath quickly, "you are greatly changed. You are not the same to me as before you went away. This thought has been forcing itself upon me, and I—oh, I could not—I would not give it credence. Tell me that it is only my fancy, dear."

He waited eagerly for her reply, but the girl did not speak.

A great sickening fear whitened his face, but he contained himself, and said quickly:

"Look up into my face, Aurelia. Don't turn from me. Tell me that you care as much for me as you did when you went away."

"What if it should not be true, Gerald?" she asked, with a hysterical laugh. "What would you say and do?"

"My God! Don't you?" he panted.

For once in her life she had the grace to speak the truth. It almost seemed to her that those horrified blue eyes *compelled* her to speak truthfully, and she answered huskily:

"Not quite."

"Has some one come between us?" he asked. "Tell me—I must know—your silence is killing me."

"Do you remember," she said slowly, "telling me that I must not fall in love with Randolph Claverling when I went to Claverling villa? Do you remember our

conversation on the subject, and—and all that was said, Gerald?”

Gerald Romaine leans heavily back against the trunk of a tree; intuitively he knows what she is going to say next, but he cannot speak—he gives no sign. It is in silence that the bravest men listen to their death-warrants.

She sees the mortal agony he is struggling through reflected in his face, and shuddering turns her head away.

“You have learned to love Randolph Claverling?” he asks, in a hoarse whisper that is more like a sob.

“I could not help it, Gerald,” she burst out. “He was everything that was grand, and handsome as a prince, and had such wealth at his command. If I had never seen *him* I am quite sure I could always have been true to you.”

There was a pause. Gerald Romaine was wrestling with that adversary of his, that deadly anger and pain; that riotous, tigerish jealousy that makes us all murderers for a time in thought at least; that mad, wild longing—madder, wilder than any love ardor—to have that rich man who has stolen from him the priceless treasure of this girl’s love at his mercy for one brief moment. The sweat of that combat stands cold upon his brow, but he overcomes his wild anguish, and when he can trust his voice, he says very gently:

“Will you tell me all about it, little one?”

She had expected bitter reproach—anything but this; she looked up into his white, troubled face hesitatingly.

“Tell me all about it, Aurelia,” he said; “keep nothing back. Were you very fond of him?”

“Yes,” she answered, drearily. “I never thought I was capable of loving any one so much. I did not think it would come to that when I first saw him, for he was so cold and proud. I meant to flirt with him a little to draw him to my side, because they told me he abhorred all women. I only meant to have a little fun with him. But he was different to all the other men in the world, Gerald. I saw there was no playing fast and loose with him—he would love me or he would hate me, and somehow I could not bear the thought of Randolph Claverling hating me. We were together day after day, and almost before I knew it I watched for his coming

step, and found my greatest pleasure in being hear him, where I could look into his face and hear him speak."

"I can understand, dear," said Gerald, and the misery in his voice alarmed her.

"Oh, I ought not to tell you!" she cried. "Why do you make me?"

"Because it is best for both of us that I should know all," he said brokenly.

"There is not much more to tell," she sobbed, flinging herself face downward in the clover-scented grass.

"He—he—asked me to—to—marry him, knowing nothing about you, and telling him nothing about you, I—I consented."

Another long silence.

"Why don't you tell me you hate me for it, Gerald?" she cries. "I cannot bear your stern silence."

He comes forward and kneels beside the prostrate figure in the long grass and lays his trembling hand on the tumbled dark curls.

"Hate you!" he whispers, and his tender, soothing voice is husky in spite of his efforts to speak calm, and the meekness of a great heroism ennobling his face—"you poor little soul, why should I hate you?—because you have found another man who is better and more lovable than I, and because you have eyes to see it?"

Aurelia sprung up from the grass, put her tumbled curls back from her flushed, tear-stained face, and the eyes he speaks of turn upon him, wide and startled, in astonished disbelief of his great generosity.

"You don't understand," she pants. "I was *engaged* to marry him, but somehow, I don't know how, he found out about you, and then in bitter wrath, because I had kept that from him, he tauntingly bade me return to you, and he left me, vowing he would never look upon my face again in this world or the next, and if he ever came to heaven and found me there, he would leave it, if it plunged him down to the very depths of hades. You *must* hate me for what I have done, Gerald," she ends, vehemently. "Don't pretend that you don't."

"I could never hate you," he answered sorrowfully. "I don't even hate him"—pausing a moment to thrust down and trample under foot one more spasm of that intolerable burning jealousy—"at least, I try not. I

was mad to think I could win and hold the love of a being so bright and beautiful as yourself, dear; I, who had nothing to offer you but the plain love of an honest man. I thought love was all that I had to strive for. I quite forgot your ambition for wealth. I wish to God I had had wealth to lay at your feet, then I might have won you; but no, I have forgotten. You learned to love Claverling, despite his wealth."

"Gerald," she whispered despairingly, "I am sorry it ever happened; but try and forget it, for I am going to keep my promise to you. I am going to marry you after all."

He did not turn to her and clasp her in his arms as she had expected he would do. There was no sudden rush of joy to his face.

"Child!" he cried, "you are very generous, but do you think I would see you sacrifice yourself so?" He shook his head sadly. "You don't know what you are saying," he went on, taking her hand gently in his as he spoke, and holding it tremblingly. "You don't know what marriage is. If there is a hell upon earth, it is in the home of those who are wedded, but who do not love each other. There must be a union of hearts as well as a union of hands, to make married life happy, or even endurable. Chilling indifference soon withers the bond of friendship between husband and wife. I would sooner die than stand at the altar with a woman whom I did not love, and whose every heart-throb was not for me. No, little one, I could never do that."

She looked up at him with dilated eyes swimming in tears.

A new and sudden terror seized her.

"Oh, Gerald," she sobbed, "if *you* throw me off too, what will become of me? I have no one else to go to—I have no other home than this. I *must* marry you, don't you see?"

At the sight of her tears, and the trembling of the hands imprisoned in his, the mad impulse to take her at her word came to him—to clasp her in his arms and kiss her tears away.

If a river of flame instead of blood were poured through his veins, they could not have throbbed with an insaner heat.

His heart pulsed frantically fast; but the paroxysm was short; it was put down—held down strongly. No, he would not have a wife whose heart was another's. He would give her up, though it tore his heart out by the roots.

Sitting there battling with this great agony, for the first time there came to him the bitter knowledge of what Margaret—Margaret, the faithful and true—must have suffered when the knowledge was forced upon her that he whom she loved cared for another.

Now he realized what she must have endured, and lived through, and he asked himself:

“Was this God's vengeance upon him, for breaking Margaret's heart?”

CHAPTER XXX.

A NOBLE LOVER.

IN all the years of Gerald Romain's after-life—years filled with bitter experiences and pain—he never forgot that moment in which he stood face to face with the greatest sorrow he had ever known.

How strange are the yearnings of the human heart!

Never, until that moment, did Gerald know fully just how dear Aurelia was to him. Giving her up seemed like tearing the heart from his body.

He looked at her sitting there under the blossoming apple-tree, with the sunlight on her beautiful face and dark, curly head—on the little hands, white as lily leaves, lying in her lap against the soft pink of her mull dress, and he could hardly restrain himself from flinging himself at her feet and crying out that he was not strong enough to part from her—that he would take her—only Heaven could know how gladly—even though the heart that should be all his *was* another's.

“I repeat,” said Aurelia, taking up the thread of conversation where they had dropped it a few moments before, “that I will marry you if you still wish me to do so, Gerald, now that you know all. Indeed”—she went on pathetically—“I suppose I shall have to.”

He looked at her sorrowfully.

“No, Aurelia,” he said, “you shall not sacrifice your

life by joining it with the destiny of a man for whom you care absolutely nothing. I release you from your betrothal. Thank God the truth has all come out before marriage. No; I will *not* marry you. You are free--free for Randolph Clavering to woo and win you."

"And for you to woo and win somebody else," she said.

He caught her two little hands in his, and looked down into her eyes.

"Look at me and believe me, dear," he said huskily. "As I have said to you before, so I say now: I shall love you to-day, to-morrow, and always."

His great, powerful love, with all its intensity--its hopelessness, rang in his husky voice. It would have touched a heart of marble.

Aurelia could not help feeling a little sorry for him, and with the impulsiveness characteristic of her, she drooped her pretty head in pity, and her red lips touched the hands that clasped hers so tightly.

She had forgotten that he *was* her lover--had forgotten that he was a man. She remembered only that he was grieving over losing her, and she could not sit quietly by without trying to comfort him a little.

Despite the closeness of her soft, supple form to his, as she leans over his clasped hands, he feels none of the passionate longing to encircle her in his arms, and waste his whole soul in burning kisses upon her beautiful face. This longing is tamed by a nobler emotion, and dare as little assail him now, as it dare assail the holy angels in paradise.

With any other man that caress might have been dangerous; with him she was safe. He laid his hand on the dark, curly head and stroked it.

"Don't make the parting any harder for me to bear, dear," he said huskily. "Anger would have been kinder than this"

"Part!" she exclaimed wonderingly. "Why, Gerald, you forget that, even though all is over between you and me, we shall still be under the same roof."

He laughed the dreariest laugh that was ever heard.

"*You* might endure that, but I never could," he said quietly. "No, no, Aurelia; I shall not consign myself to a living death; and seeing you constantly, now that

I know you never can be mine, would be worse than death to me. I shall go away—so far away that you will never hear of me or of my failures—if I make any—in the struggle for fame and fortune. I will throw myself body and soul into hard work—not with the hope of forgetting you, for that could never be; I have loved you too well for that. There is not an hour in the day when your face will not be before me, and when I will not long to be near you. But, with God's help, I will live such longings down, I shall try not to let it wreck my life. Hard work will be my only panacea.

“This I would say to you, dear; if you ever need a true and honest friend, send for me, and no matter in what part of the world I may be, I will come to you. If you are ever in want I will share the last dollar I have with you, or—or with any one whom you loved. In such a time I might be able to prove to you the depths of my love for you.”

“When do you expect to go, Gerald?” she asked, with a shudder, yet withal with a feeling of relief; for the thought that flashed through her mind while he was speaking was: with Gerald out of the way, and this betrothal broken off, she could write Randolph Claverling to come to her.

“The sooner I go the better,” returned Gerald, quietly. “I shall take the early morning train; I shall be far away from the farm long hours before you are awake, and for that reason we must say good-bye to each other here and now. I could not part from *you* before all the rest. I will say good-bye to them to-night.”

He drew her toward him gently, looking with his whole soul into the fatally beautiful face he had loved too well.

“Darling,” he whispered, yearningly, “if death had taken you from me, and you lay in your coffin, I should bend over you and lay upon your lips my last farewell kiss. May I kiss you with just such a kiss now? Remember it is the last and only one I will ever give you, and all that is left of my heart's broken love-dream will be in it. You do not speak, Aurelia?” he added. “Is it so hard, dear, to grant my last request?”

She raised her face to his, and the clasp of his arms tightened about her, and for many a long day afterward

the memory of that last, burning, despairing kiss burned her lips.

“Shall you write to me, Gerald?” she asked, as he was turning away.

“I had best not,” he answered; and with the words, “farewell, my lost love,” he turned abruptly and walked down the path, and Aurelia returned alone to the house.

He did not join the family at the tea-table—only Aurelia knew why. She went to her room early that he might have the opportunity of acquainting them of his sudden departure and taking leave of them; she could not bear another sight of his pale, reproachful face.

The grief of Farmer Romaine and his wife was great when Gerald broke the startling news to them that he was to leave them on the morrow—to remain long years perhaps. Margaret heard the words with a paling cheek.

“Aurelia *has* told him of her love for Randolph Clavering,” she thought—ay, she *knew* that must be the cause of his sudden and unexpected exile, and her heart bled for him!

“May God give him strength to bear it,” was gentle Margaret’s prayer to Heaven.

He turned from his weeping mother to Margaret and held out his hands.

“Good-bye, Margaret, sweet Margaret, faithful and true!” he said, with tears in his eyes. “If we never meet again in this world—I—I—shall never forget you. Heaven bless you for your kindness—your—your—forbearance with me, Margaret,” he murmured, brokenly. “You are too tender of heart, too noble of soul, to rejoice in the great sorrow that God has put upon me! Know this much, that the misery I thoughtlessly dealt out to you has been brought back tenfold to my own door. I have no right to expect your sympathy—your pity: but I say to you, gentle Margaret, whom I have so bitterly and thoughtlessly wronged: Think of me and my faults, and my heartlessness toward you, as kindly as you can.”

Reverently he raised the little ice-cold hand to his lips. There was the opening and shutting of the door that led up the stairway to his room.

Farmer Romaine and his wife followed Gerald there, and Margaret was alone.

Only Heaven, and the pale, white stars gleaming in through the open windows, saw how she dropped on her knees and kissed the faded roses of the carpet that Gerald's feet had so lately pressed, and watered them with her anguished tears.

She tried to say "God's will be done," but her cold lips would not frame the words; and in the abandon of her wild grief she cried out that, for the first time in her life, she doubted the judgment and wisdom of God.

"No good came of his being taken from me when I loved him so well," she moaned. "I would have guarded his heart and his love so tenderly—now it is crushed, trampled upon, and tossed aside like a useless toy. May Heaven give him the strength to bear it."

Nothing but wonder filled her heart, that Aurelia could have given up such an adoring love as Gerald Romaine's for any other man's in the universe.

How strangely Heaven directed men's hearts! Two good and noble men had loved Aurelia with all the strength of their natures, and nobody had ever loved her.

As Gerald had said, she was too noble to rejoice that he had lost Aurelia.

Her love for him was so deep and true that she was grieved to the depths of her soul at his grief and blighted hopes.

Now he would know all the weary heart-hunger she had endured, and she thought of the sad lines that had come to her so often of late, and which she had always wept over:

"'Tis sweet to feel in this sad world of change,
Where selfishness and pride so much abound,
That there is one, however wide we range,
To greet us lovingly when home is found.
One whom we know will faithful be till death,
Whose heart-throbs play in concert with our own;
Whose love will bless us till our latest breath,
To whose pure bosom falsehood is unknown.

"The famished wretch who drops his head with shame,
May be relieved by any passer-by;
The ardent youth who hungers after fame
Has always hope of feasting presently.

But, oh! to feel that we are all alone,
That love's sweet cup has vaped to the lees;
That there is no heart we can call our own—
This is a hunger nothing can appease.

“To wander on without a ray of hope,
To find no respite even in our sleep;
Life's sun extinguished, in the dark to grope,
And hopeless through this world to creep.
No balm for us—no medicine can cure—
The ailing is beyond the reach of art;
All other hunger strong men may endure,
Except the weary, dreary hunger of the heart.”

But there was little use in dreaming over what might have been; the question now was, to look bravely toward the future, and learn to forget her love for a man whose life was wrecked on the rock of Aurelia's love—for he could never be anything to her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GREAT CHANGES THAT ALTER TWO DESTINIES.

TIME never lingers in its perpetual journey onward. Almost before we are aware of it, the past lies far behind us and we stand upon the threshold of the future—that future which so many wish they could foresee, but which they would shrink from with dread greater than even the fear of death—if the curtains which shut it out from our gaze could be lifted but for one little moment.

Six months had winged its slow flight by since Gerald Romaine had left home.

On the very eve of his departure Aurelia had written to Randolph Clavering, telling him that no one stood between them now—that *she was free*—free to love him, and to have the hope that all love for her had not died out of his heart.

But to this effusive epistle Aurelia received no reply; and she knew then that Randolph Clavering had kept his word and gone abroad, and that he would be absent, as he had said, “Perhaps long years—perhaps forever;” and the girl's life merged into one great hope and expectancy of what might happen when he returned and found her—free.

Oh, if she but knew where to write to him to tell him about it, was the one cry of her soul.

How detestable the plain, homely farm life, with its prosaic daily routine, seemed to her when she compared it with the gorgeous oriental scenes which Randolph Clavering was enjoying.

She hated the sight of the cows, browsing in the pasture, and the mild-eyed sheep on the green lea. She never deigned to notice the farm hands, and always scoffed at Margaret for giving them a kindly smile or a word as she passed them by.

There were three at the old farmhouse who missed Gerald's presence more than tongue could tell. Farmer Romaine never complained, but when he sat for hours on the porch at night, silently smoking his pipe and looking with thoughtful eyes toward the south, they knew his thoughts were with his son. Mrs. Romaine grieved for Gerald as only mothers can grieve for an absent son; and Margaret, gentle, faithful Margaret, never laid her head to rest without saying in her prayer: "Heaven watch over Gerald."

And the one Gerald Romaine loved best, never gave him a thought, save to rejoice that he had gone.

For the first few months Gerald's letters came regularly enough; then came a letter at length telling them of a long and perilous journey to Brazil which he intended to take in the interest of his patents.

"My hopes have been greatly raised," he wrote, "yet if they come to naught I will still be cheerful and hope on; but if my expectations are realized I shall be a rich man—rich beyond my wildest dreams. How happy I could make you all then—there would be no more toil, no more worrying to make both ends meet."

There had been tears in Farmer Romaine's eyes when he laid down that letter.

"Bless the boy," he said, huskily; "he means well, but I could never leave the farm, wife. I have been brought up to honest toil; a life of idleness would not set well with me. I want to live and die here where I can see the fruits of my industry around me—see the sun ripening the grain in the fields, and breathe the free air of Heaven.

“I don’t like the idea of Gerald’s going away off to Brazil—it seems like going out of the world. His eager yearning for wealth may carry our boy too far, Rachel. Many a man started for Brazil in my younger days, when the diamond fever broke out there, but none of them ever lived to come back. They fell sick in the swamps and died there. I wish Gerald had not gone to Brazil. I have a strange forewarning that I shall never see my boy again.”

Perhaps it was this last thought which preyed upon his mind, until at last his health gave way under it.

For three or four days, ere he succumbed to the fatal illness which hovered about him, casting its dark shadows over him, Farmer Romaine’s manner seemed peculiar.

He had been more than usually quiet, and spent most of his time in his arm-chair on the porch, saying little to any one, but with an expression on his face that rather troubled his wife; it was so unlike the bright, cheerful one natural to him.

She went to him and laid her hands on his shoulders, looking anxiously down into his dreamy eyes.

“What are you thinking of all the time you sit here, John?” she said.

“I am thinking of Gerald. Sometimes I fancy that he is beside me, talking to me, and I can scarcely persuade myself that the sound of his voice calling my name was but my imagination.”

“That is a sick fancy, John,” she returned quickly.

“Is it?” he answered carelessly, adding: “I think you must be right, Rachel. I have not felt well this last fortnight; but I do not like to complain.”

Mrs. Romaine bent over her husband, her honest face full of solicitude.

The hand she touched was burning hot, and his face had a crimson flush.

She did not feel quite at ease about him. She had never seen him like this before.

“You are not well, John,” she said. “I wish you would see a doctor.”

He laughed. There is nothing a man hates more than the mention of a doctor.

“He would do me no good, Rachel,” he declared.

"You are the best doctor I could have. There is nothing wrong with me, but that my head is filled with foolish fancies."

"About Gerald?" she asked quickly.

He nodded.

"What are your fancies, John?" she said. "Tell me about them."

"I am almost ashamed to express them," he replied dreamily. "It seems foolish, but the wonder is, that at times they seem so real. I often fancy I see Gerald up there in the clouds, and he is calling to me."

"Is my only son dead, or is John about to be taken from me?" the poor woman asked herself in the greatest alarm. Surely these fancies were the token of some dread calamity which seemed about to fall upon her.

She sought Margaret at once to consult with her.

She never dreamed of seeking Aurelia.

"I have noticed that he did not look well lately," Margaret said soothingly; "but as he has never been sick a day in his life, let us hope that this indisposition will wear away."

"Oh, what a comfort you are to me, Margaret," she sobbed.

That evening Margaret lingered long at the old gentleman's side as he sat on the moonlit porch.

The expression on his face struck her, and her heart ached for him.

"Margaret," he said slowly, "they say that when strong men are taken ill—men who have been well and strong all their lives—that they go quickly. Do you think that is true?"

"Yes," she said. "But, oh, Uncle John, why do you speak of that?"

He laid his trembling hand on her bowed head.

"You are so wise and sensible, I can talk to you, Margaret," he said slowly, in a low voice. "Listen to what I am going to say now, child. I am ill, Margaret, I am very much more ill than any one dreams or imagines, but I dread lest my dear old wife should know it. Ah, Margaret, I—I am afraid."

The girl's lovely face grew pale; her eyes sought his.

In all the past years, she had never heard the strong, brave, patient man speak of being afraid.

"Of what are you afraid, Uncle John?" she whispered; and the sudden terror in her heart told her what he was about to say.

"I am afraid my time has come—to go," he said softly. "I feel ill, with a strange sensation of weakness; and, Margaret, I am quite sure it is because the gray shadow of death is lowering—lowering over my head, and will soon infold me. Do you understand my presentiment, Margaret?"

"Yes," she replied, with a long-drawn, bitter sob; "but I will not, I cannot believe that you are to be taken from us. I cannot think of life without you, you have been so much to us. If you die, we shall die with you. We could not part from you."

He was looking dreamily at her.

"I should not like to go just yet," he sighed, "not until the mortgage is cleared from the farm. Debt is a sad heritage to leave one's loved ones. I have always been frugal and saving; but accumulating has been the slow work of years of toil—I have saved but little. The thought of death brings terror to a man, when he knows he has left his loved ones unprovided for."

At that moment Aurelia came out on the porch to look for Margaret, and, with a sigh, John Romaine leaned back in his chair, and bade Margaret go with her sister—Aurelia's presence always had a harassing effect upon him. Margaret knew that, and went with her, though she was loath to leave him—he seemed to derive such comfort in talking to her, and having her near him. If Margaret had been his own daughter, John Romaine could not have loved her more.

John Romaine did not answer his wife's summons when she called to him to come in, that the night-dew was falling; and going up to him she found him sitting with his face turned toward the south, and a peaceful smile on his lips. John Romaine's ears would never hearken to mortal sounds again—his soul had quietly fluttered away to that realm from whence no traveler ever returns. He was sitting there, with the moonlight falling like a halo about his calm face—dead!

Upon Margaret devolved the care of laying him to

rest, for Mrs. Romaine was stricken down by the terrible blow.

But sorrow, even as pitiful as death, rarely travels singly; within a fortnight after they had made John Romaine's grave under the drooping willow, they placed his wife beside him.

Her lips had never opened from the hour that she had made the terrible discovery of her husband's death; the sudden shock had completely prostrated her, and it ended in a stroke of apoplexy and partial paralysis.

"It looks to me," said Aurelia, as the two sisters watched beside Mrs. Romaine, "that there is something she wishes to tell me. Do you see how her eyes follow me about?"

"Yes; I have noticed it," whispered Margaret, slowly.

"Perhaps it is something concerning our parentage," returned Aurelia; "I have always thought she knew more about us than she ever told."

But what it was, Aurelia was never destined to know from Mrs. Romaine's lips. The warning which would have saved so many lives from being wrecked, was not destined to be told by her. The story of the past was buried with her, to Aurelia's bitter cost.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SHOULD MAY WED WITH DECEMBER?

THE great changes which had taken place at Romaine farm had come upon the two girls so suddenly that, for a time, they were quite paralyzed with their grief.

The duties of the whole trying affair developed upon Margaret. Aurelia was very helpless; she could only sit and wring her white hands, exclaiming, piteously:

"What is to become of us, now that they are gone, Margy?"

"The only thing that I know of is to run the farm as best we can until we hear from Gerald," returned Margaret, thoughtfully.

This matter fate soon settled for them in the person of a grim old farmer, who, immediately after the fune-

ral was over, took charge of the estate, and to Margaret he unfolded the terrible news that, as the mortgage money was long since over-due, together with the accumulated interest, he should sell Romaine farm at once under foreclosure.

Then the cry that was so often on Aurelia's lips fell from Margaret's:

"What will become of my sister and me? Heaven have pity on us!"

There was only one person to whom Margaret would have gone for counsel, and that was good old Dr. Thorpe; but unfortunately, he was away. He had been called to New York on business, and his return was very uncertain.

The gruff old farmer was touched by Margaret's grief.

"You see, sir, we have never known any other home," she said, striving bravely to keep back her tears, "and going out to face the world seems a little hard to us at first; I do not care so much for myself; it is only Aurelia that I feel sorry for."

Silas Phelps drew his chair, awkwardly, nearer Margaret, looking, with eager eyes, at the pale, sweet young face.

"There would be no call for you to leave the place, if you only was to say the word, Miss Lancaster," he said, with a little chuckling laugh, and drawing his chair nearer still to the girl.

"Do you mean to say that Aurelia and I can really stay here for a little while, sir—until I can see my way clear as to what to do in the future?"

"That's what I said, and I'll stick to it, Miss Lancaster," he declared.

"Oh, how good you are, sir!" sobbed Margaret. "God will surely reward you for your kindness to us!"

"I want *you* to reward me, Miss Lancaster," he said, with a sly wink. "I never call on strangers for favors."

"*Me!*" said Margaret, raising her puzzled eyes wonderingly to his.

He nodded, and hitched his chair a little nearer still—so near that his hot breath, as he leaned eagerly toward her, fanned the girl's cold, white cheek.

"If there is anything that I can do for you, I shall be

very pleased," returned Margaret, rising with quiet dignity from her chair, and retreating to the window.

The unwieldy old farmer followed her with alacrity.

"By jingo! how shy you are, Miss Lancaster!" he cried, with a loud, explosive laugh, "as difficult to approach as a wild squirrel."

His demeanor certainly alarmed Margaret; she was quite at a loss what reply to make to this; so she made none, but looked at him, calmly, wonderingly.

"I know I ain't neither young, nor likewise very handsome, Miss Lancaster," he began, hesitatingly; "but I've got that which goes a mighty sight further than a good-looking face and white hands—I've got plenty of money, and that's what the women are after nowadays, I find."

"Sir," said Margaret, flushing painfully, "I do not comprehend your meaning in the least. Kindly excuse me. Aurelia needs me!"

"Come, come, now, you do understand," he declared, with another loud laugh and a wink. "I ain't a man to talk flowery nonsense like a young, foolish fellow, but I reckon you know what I'm tryin' to git at. Well, here it is, plain talk, then—I'd like fer to marry you, Miss Lancaster. I've sort o' taken a fancy to your quiet, ladylike ways and your sweet face. Marry me, and your sister can stay here along o' you. As I said afore, I'm not as young as I once was, but I'm a mighty spry man for one just turned sixty—chipper as a boy—and I'm worth a heap."

"Sir!" echoed Margaret, aghast, when she could find her voice.

"Come, now, don't call me that," he cut in. "Say Silas. You might do worse than to marry a rich widower, I can tell you, my girl," he went on impatiently. "There's plenty o' 'em would jest jump at the chance o' bein' Mrs. Silas Phelps. I kin draw my check for half a million o' money. That's all I need to say to any woman I want for a wife—and I'd get her, you bet!"

"Mr. Phelps," said Margaret, kindly, "believe me, I am deeply grateful for the honor you have paid me in asking me to be your wife—the greatest honor a man

can pay to a woman; but I answer that it can never be."

"Hey!" exclaimed Silas Phelps, thunderstruck. "Did you refuse me? Didn't you hear me say I was worth half a million o' money?"

"All the money in the world does not buy love, Mr. Phelps," returned Margaret, gravely, but gently. "Money is the least consideration a woman should look for in making a choice of a husband, with whom she has to live all her life."

"Well, I'll be hanged if I ever heard the like of that talk from a woman's lips afore. You must be a different being from the rest o' the sex, Miss Lancaster," he declared, looking at her curiously and angrily. "I'll bet that the reason is—because you think I'm too old to marry a young girl. Come, be honest now, isn't that it?"

"I do not believe any young girl should marry without love," repeated Margaret; "and I believe it impossible for a young girl to really love an old man—it is not natural."

"I'll never forgive you to the day I die for that insult, Margaret Lancaster!" he cried, springing to his feet, his face fairly purple with rage. "I'll show you how I kin resent it."

"I had no thought of insulting you, sir. I only spoke the simple truth," said Margaret, greatly startled at the volcano of wrath she had stirred up.

"I reckon you'll understand afore you are two days older what refusin' me means fer you. I'll tell you this: if you don't come to me or send for me in two days' time, and say, 'I've changed my mind, I'll marry you, Silas,' out of this house you'll go—you and your sister along with you, in double-quick time. Now, you hear what I said, and you know what I'll do if I don't hear satisfactory from you. Good-morning, Miss Margaret Lancaster."

Like one turned suddeniy to stone, Margaret watched him depart, and the sound of his heavy tread, as he walked down the gravel path that led to the gate, was like a death-knell on the girl's heart.

With trembling steps she flew up the stairs and burst sobbingly into the room where Aurelia was sit-

ting, and casting herself on the hassock beside Aurelia, in broken gasps and sobs she told her of what had just happened.

"And you *refused*—old Silas Phelps!" cried Aurelia, when she had come to the end of her story. "I can't believe I have heard aright."

"Of course, dear," sighed Margaret, lifting her tear-stained face from her sister's shoulder.

"Then you were a bigger fool than I even took you to be," declared Aurelia, "but thank fortune he gave you two days' respite in which to think the matter over—that's the only thing that has saved us."

"Surely, Aurelia," gasped Margaret, "you don't think—you don't mean—that I should—that I could—"

"I mean that you will have to marry old Phelps of course," cut in Aurelia. "Gracious goodness! if he had taken you at your word at once, we would both have been turned out of doors."

"I would rather be turned out of doors than marry Mr. Phelps," sobbed Margaret. "I can only believe you are jesting, Aurelia, when you even propose such a possibility, and it is a sorrowful subject to jest on."

"I am *not* jesting," returned her sister, wrathfully, "I never was more in earnest in my life. It is enough to make me fairly raging to know you came so near throwing away half a million of money, and you and I as poor as two church mice."

"You seem to forget that he is an old man—and that I could never love him," gasped Margaret, looking at her in horrified amazement.

"Fiddlesticks!" retorted Aurelia, "who said anything about your loving him? I didn't, I'm sure. Marry him and never mind about the love. He will give you plenty of money, and then you and I can see something of life. We can have fine clothes and diamonds, ride in our carriage, and go where we like, leaving him where he belongs, vegetating on his old farm."

"I would not deceive him so. I would marry no man for his money, Aurelia," said Margaret, solemnly.

"You always was a little goody-goody fool!" stormed Aurelia. "If you want to be an angel you should not stay down here—you should go up where angels belong."

Now, Margaret, be reasonable; you'll have to marry old Phelps to save us, and you know it."

"I could not sacrifice my life in that way, dear," sobbed Margaret, piteously: "ask anything else of me and I will do it, cheerfully."

"You will have to marry old Phelps, and you know you will, so where's the use of making a scene over it?" demanded Aurelia.

"I would sooner die," murmured Margaret, with horror. "Oh, do not speak about it again, Aurelia, I—I—shall faint if you do."

"I shall write a note to Phelps, and tell him that you accept him," declared Aurelia, "and then you will have to accede with the best grace possible. I am going to see that you do not throw half a million of dollars away and throw both of us out on the world by your foolish notions. I'll write this very night, and I shall declare to him that you wrote the letter, and rest assured he will hold you to it."

"Oh, Aurelia, I *could not* marry old Mr. Phelps," sobbed Margaret; "better starve than marry a man whom I should abhor."

"I should not fancy starving even if you do," retorted Aurelia, "and besides," she added—"you ought to have some feeling for me; think of all the fine things you could buy me if you were only married rich," she urged.

"Such a marriage would be a sin against Heaven," cried Margaret, sobbing as though her heart would break; "it can never be, Aurelia. I tell you," she cried, vehemently, "I would rather lie dead, with the hope of resting quietly in the grave beside mother, than link my life to one who would bring me nothing but endless misery."

"Half a million dollars would bring you any amount of pleasures, I fancy," sneered Aurelia, heartlessly. She well knew her fatal influence when she brought it to bear with full force upon Margaret. She could not hold out long against her persuasions.

No matter what Margaret's feelings might be, Aurelia determined that she should marry rich old Silas Phelps. Margaret would be powerless to resist, in her hands.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FACING THE CRUEL WORLD.

DESPITE Margaret's tearful entreaty, Aurelia sent her letter to Farmer Phelps that night, and on the receipt of it, the old man was highly elated.

There was one thing about the affair which he did not quite relish; and that was that it should be a week from that date, at the earliest, that he should call upon Margaret as a prospective bridegroom—she must have that length of time to accustom herself to the idea of looking upon him in that light.

"Well, I suppose all women have their whims," he said, twisting up the letter to light his pipe with—to save burning a match; "and mebbe it's jest as well to humor 'em *afore* marriage, at least."

Silas Phelps had a little spark of romance in him yet.

All that day, as he goes about the homely duties of the farm, he can think of nothing else but Margaret Lancaster.

With all the enthusiasm of a younger man he pictures Margaret at the window watching for him, as she will do when she is his wife—Margaret, in the blue, clinging dress that shows off every line and curve of the supple, slender, girlish figure; and he thinks of her until the blood courses in youthful riotousness through his veins; and, as he looks about him, he glories in the wealth and power that has brought her to his feet, so to speak.

Meanwhile the object of his thoughts was unhappy enough.

It was bitter work combating Aurelia's fixed determination, and Aurelia had set her heart upon Margaret's marrying Silas Phelps' money.

"There is only one thing left for me to do," said Margaret at length, in despair; "and that is, to tell Mr. Phelps when he comes that I did not write the letter, and that you wrote it and sent it without my sanction, and that I do not hold myself responsible for anything it may contain."

"And be bundled out of the house the next minute," sneered Aurelia.

"I cannot help what may happen then," sobbed Margaret. "I tell you I would rather die than marry Mr. Phelps."

And, for the first time in her life, she parted from her sister in bitter anger.

"I do not see why I was ever born," sobbed Margaret that night as she paced up and down under the trees. "I have not had a pleasant life of it like other girls. Why have I not been shown more mercy?—even the star of love, that radiates other young girls' lives, and makes life worth the living, set almost as soon as it had risen, with me, and left me in gloom, darker and more desolate than death. I cry out again, why was I ever born?—or why did not my mother take me with her in my infancy, to that land where there are no heartaches, no sorrows?"

Only the wind moaning in the trees overhead heard poor Margaret's lamentations. The breeze sighed with her as it quivered among the swaying green leaves, then drifted onward.

"I have come out here to think what I had best do," she murmured, pacing hurriedly up and down; "but somehow my thoughts are all chaos."

For long hours she paced up and down under the trees wringing her slender white hands, imploring Heaven to show her some way out of the difficulty.

Then, all at once, like an inspiration, a sudden idea came to her—why not go quietly away, so far away that Silas Phelps' name would be never again sounded in her ears?

The more Margaret thought of the matter, the more the idea grew upon her, and she decided to put it into execution at once, while she had the courage to execute it.

Hurrying into the house, Margaret stole quietly past the room where Aurelia slept, and gained her own apartment.

Very noiselessly she packed an old sachel with her few belongings—that done, she proceeded to write a few hasty lines to Aurelia:

“MY DARLING,”—she wrote—“When you read this I shall be far away. I leave you with a breaking heart; but, oh! dearest sister, I could not stay and marry Mr. Phelps. By dint of hard saving of all the pin-money dear old Uncle John gave me, I managed to lay by a hundred dollars. I will take twenty-five of it with me; the rest I leave with you, and feel thankful in the knowledge that it will keep you from immediate want when Mr. Phelps asks you to leave the farm. You will find it in my little black trunk, dear. Take the money, and board economically in the village with it until you hear from me; long before it is exhausted, I hope to have found something in New York to do by which I can make enough to support you and me comfortably. When I do, I shall write you at once. Oh, dearest! do not blame me for the step I have taken—believe me, I have weighed this action over with the utmost consideration.

“I would give my life for you, darling—to see you happy and surrounded by luxury such as you crave and your beauty should have; but, oh! I cannot purchase it by marrying Mr. Phelps; life with him would be a living death. Good-bye, love; I cover the paper I write upon with a world of loving kisses, knowing that it will rest in your white hands while your eyes travel over what I have written here. Let us hope for the best in our future, darling! Surely God, who is so good—who takes care of even the little, helpless sparrows, will not let us want!

“As a last request, I say to you, darling, until you hear from me, always think of your poor, unhappy Margaret at her best!”

There was no signature to this tear-blotted epistle—indeed, it needed none.

Carefully placing the note where Aurelia would be sure to see it directly she entered the room, Margaret stole quietly to the door.

“Good-bye, old room!” she sobbed, turning back waveringly for one moment when she reached the threshold. “Even in my dreams in my after-life I shall see that little white bed, that rug—the stand, with the little cracked mirror over it; that vase, with flowers, on the window-sill; my little black trunk, and the sloping roof, with its whitewashed rafters. You are to be my home

never again, little room—for the old farm has passed into a stranger's hands."

Margaret could not utter another syllable, her heart was so full; and turning quickly away, she hurried down the narrow passage. At Aurelia's door, she paused.

"I am doing it all for the best, dearest," she sobbed, below her breath. "I know you will censure me bitterly; but, oh! I could not marry Mr. Phelps—not even to please you."

With quiet footsteps, Margaret passed out of the house.

As she shut the wicket-gate behind her, the clock, in a far-off belfry—slowly, in measured strokes—told the hour of ten.

She had plenty of time to reach the cross-roads, for the New York train did not reach there until within a few moments of midnight.

She took the path which led to it in a roundabout way over the hills; though there were many other paths much nearer it, she chose this roundabout route because it would take her past the old churchyard, where her mother lay.

She reached it, and passed swiftly through the tall gate into the enclosure.

She knew her way perfectly well; she walked on, shivering, though it was a summer's night, quietly among the green graves of the quiet, sleeping dead; she knew no fear; although the pale moon threw ghastly shadows on the grass; the tall fir-trees looked like giants, and the white marble crosses gleamed under the stars. She knew no fear, but went up to the green, grassy mound, under which her young mother slept.

How strange it seemed to picture her *young*, and to think that all the years that had come and gone had been nothing to her.

Margaret sunk down upon her knees on the mound, and buried her tear-stained face in the long, cool grass.

"I am going away, mother," she sobbed, "but, oh, you, whose white soul is in heaven—you who are, perhaps, looking down even now upon your unhappy child, know that it is best. Ah, mother, how often I have wished that you had taken me with you when you left

this cold and bitter world; but it is too late for repining now. Perhaps you had some good reason in wanting me to live.

“There will be no one to train the white roses over your grave when I am gone, and no one to brush away the cold white sheets of snow when winter comes. I am never coming back until my last hour is drawing near, mother; then I am coming back to die upon your grave, with my head lying above your cold, pulseless heart; and then, maybe, they will bury me beside you.”

Long and freely her pent-up tears flowed.

Then she aroused herself to the necessity of the present. She must go at once if she were to reach the cross-roads in time for the New York express.

She never forgot that last hour which she spent at her mother's grave, and the heartrending grief it was to her to at length tear herself away.

The face of the heavens had changed since she had been kneeling there. The moon had hidden her pale face behind lowering clouds, which had spread slowly, shutting out the light of the golden stars one by one.

The trees swayed to and from each other; the air freshened, and as Margaret looked up at the dark sky, a few raindrops pattered down upon her white face. She always said to herself ever afterward that they were her angel mother's tears up in heaven—that her young mother was sorry for her, and grieved that her life had been so much drearier than the lives of other young girls.

There was the usual number of passengers on the northern-bound train, but the slim young girl who boarded it at the cross-roads, robed in a plain, coarse brown dress, with simple jacket and cloth cap to match, did not attract special attention.

The train moved slowly out from the station, and as the last lights of the village faded from her view in the thick blackness of night, Margaret bowed her fair head and wept like a child.

A full realization of her position swept over her aching heart. She was face to face with the great, hard, cruel world, to battle with it for her daily bread, and she was going to that great metropolis that she had read of and dreaded so much. Yes, alone and unaided she was going

to New York City—she, whose whole life had been spent on the quiet, peaceful old farm, and whose thoughts of life and the people in it were as pure and spotless as the white lilies in their native vales.

Poor Margaret, it was well for her that she could not see what the future had in store for her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNEXPECTED INTELLIGENCE.

AURELIA was not an early riser, consequently it was not until a late hour the next morning that she discovered Margaret's flight, and her amazement knew no bounds. She had never dreamed that—even driven to extremes—gentle, docile Margaret would have recourse to such a measure as this.

Aurelia's anger was great, as she read the letter hurriedly through which she found pinned to the cushion on the little dresser.

"I am glad," she exclaimed heartlessly, as she crushed it in her little pink palm, and flung it from her, "that she left me the money, anyhow. I don't know what in the world I should have done without it."

The thought never troubled her as to what Margaret was to do without it; Aurelia's first thought was always of self.

She knew that she would be obliged to follow Margaret's directions—board until she heard from her; and to tell the truth, this sort of lady's life rather pleased her; she wished that Margaret would make enough to keep her boarding forever.

"A sorry time I shall have now with old Phelps," she muttered. "I do not know how I am to tell him that Margaret has gone. I'll look over her letter again, and see what she has to say!" but a thorough search of the room failed to disclose the crumpled bit of paper.

"Now what in the world could I have done with it?" exclaimed Aurelia, greatly puzzled. "I am sure that I flung it down on the dresser; but the question is, where is it now?"

Aurelia made another search of the small apartment, with an equally fruitless result.

The truth of the matter was, a passing sportive breeze had caught the wisp of paper up, and had carried it out of the window, depositing it directly at the feet of Silas Phelps, who was advancing rapidly up the gravel path.

"Hey, what's this?" he muttered, stooping to recover it. "A letter, by all that's wonderful! I wonder if some of the young men of the village have been writing to Margaret?" and a sudden, jealous fire leaped up in his heart in an instant, burning as fiercely as if he were six-and-twenty, instead of over sixty.

Adjusting his spectacles on his nose, Farmer Phelps smoothed out the crumpled page, and slowly, line by line, mastered its contents; and by the time he reached the end of the note, no words can describe the rage into which he had worked himself.

"Gone! She has fled—to escape marrying me!" he cried, grinding his teeth together in awful fury. "But I'll show her and hers what it is to play fast and loose with Silas Phelps. Lord! I'm too old a man to be made a fool of by young women. There's some trick behind this, and I know it. No doubt she's in hiding somewhere, and hopes to have me make the proposition that I'll settle a cool hundred thousand or so on her if she'll only come back. But I'll do nothing of the kind—I'll buy the affections of no young woman. Not me," and, fuming with anger, he knocked heavily on the door of the farmhouse.

Aurelia answered the summons, and a slight cry broke from her lips on seeing who stood on the threshold.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Mr. Phelps? Please walk in and take a seat," she said, trying to speak unconcernedly; adding: "I suppose you come to see Margaret? I'm awfully sorry to say that you can't see her just now."

Silas Phelps looked at the girl keenly.

For answer, he walked deliberately up to the table and spread out Margaret's letter before Aurelia's confused eyes.

"I picked it up on the walk," he said, harshly, "and I read it, so don't be trying that there game—tryin' to make me believe your sister's about the house when you

know she isn't, and when you know, too, that she ran away rather than marry me."

"Well," said Aurelia, with cool audacity that exasperated Silas Phelps, "seeing you know all about it, there is no use in my denying that Margaret has gone, and to tell the truth," she added to herself, "I cannot blame her much."

Low as this soliloquy was muttered, it reached the old man's keen ears.

"Do you think I'm such an ogre your sister couldn't love me? Hey?" he demanded, wrathily.

Aurelia shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"I couldn't answer for my sister as to what she might love—or whom," she answered, demurely.

Silas Phelps looked at her for an instant, then suddenly a new idea came to him, his eyes brightened, and his withered old cheeks flushed.

"Say!" he cried, eagerly. "Hev you ever heard of the old saw—that it's an ill wind that blows nobody good? Now look here, Miss Lancaster," he continued, eagerly, "what do *you* say to marrying the old chap yer sister threw over—hey?"

A laugh that made the old rafters ring resounded through the farmhouse kitchen. Farmer Phelps' face darkened as he heard it.

"Well," he exclaimed, impatiently, "do you say the word, Miss Lancaster? I've sot my mind on a young and good-lookin' wife, and I'm rich enough to get one—don't you make any mistake about that."

"You're awfully kind, and I thank you for the honor conferred, but really I must decline it all the same," laughed Aurelia. "You will have to look farther for a young wife, Mr. Phelps."

"I'd be obleeged to know your objections, Miss Lancaster," he said, so tartly that Aurelia burst into another peal of laughter that angered him the more.

"Well, in the first place, when I marry, I don't intend to marry a man old enough to have played lover to my grandmother. I have a penchant for a handsome face, raven-black locks—untouched by the frosts of time—for a curling mustache and a tall, slim, straight figure; and you see, Mr. Phelps, you don't fill the bill in any particular."

"I ain't goin' to give a woman my money and coax her into the bargain," he retorted, scarcely able to control his rage. "I'll jest say this to you, Miss Lancaster: I'm a-goin' to take possession of this here place day after to-morrow. I'll expect you and your traps out by that time. You can beg or starve for all I care—so can your sister. I wouldn't marry the one nor the other of you now if you got down on your knees to me. Good-morning, miss."

Aurelia bowed him out of her presence with a gay carelessness that stung him almost to madness.

"I'm not sorry to leave this dull old place, anyhow," muttered Aurelia. "As much as I detest the quiet, hum-drum village, it will be a heaven to this place."

That afternoon, while Aurelia was busy packing her trunk, there was another heavy knock at the door.

"It's old Phelps again—coming back to press his suit, I'm sure," she muttered, angrily. "I have half a mind not to answer the summons at all. Why, that old man's an idiot to think any young woman in her senses would want to marry so many wrinkles and two hundred and sixty pounds of flesh. Ugh! it makes me sick to even think of it."

The knocking was repeated louder this time, and with a frown on her face, Aurelia ran down-stairs and flung open the door; but instead of seeing Farmer Phelps there, as she had expected, she was confronted by a tall, elderly gentleman with a decided military bearing.

"Have I the pleasure of seeing Miss Margaret Lancaster?" he exclaimed, raising his hat courteously, and bowing low before this fair young vision of loveliness that greeted his eyes.

"Now, what in the world does he want with Margaret?" was the thought that flashed through her head.

"My business is of strict importance, and must be confided to her—and to her only!" the stranger declared.

That last sentence settled the matter; her curiosity was aroused to such a pitch that she determined to find out his business with Margaret at any cost. What if she did use a little deception about the matter, who would know?

"I am Margaret Lancaster," she said quietly, invit-

ing the gentleman to enter, and placing a chair for him.

"You will permit me to introduce myself?" he said, taking the proffered seat. "I am Mr. Harding, of the firm of Harding & White, of New York. We are lawyers," he added, with a smile, noting her look of wonder at this intelligence.

Aurelia bowed, not knowing what to say, the thought flashing through her brain:

"What in the world could a New York lawyer want with Margaret?"

"I have strange news for you, my dear Miss Lancaster," said Mr. Harding. "I will break it to you as gently as I can."

Aurelia wondered if it was something about Gerald Romaine.

"Have no fear to speak unreservedly," she said. "I cannot endure suspense. I hope you will tell me what you have come here to say quickly," she added, with all a young girl's impulsiveness.

"I will begin by referring to our friend, Dr. Thorpe," he commenced thoughtfully. "He was a friend of your family, and a particular friend of yours, Miss Lancaster."

"Yes," said Aurelia, vaguely ruminating on what was coming next, and thinking that one word of assent the safest answer.

"When he took that trip to New York," continued Mr. Harding, "a strange premonition came to him that he would never return alive; so strong was this impression in his mind that he called upon our firm one day, and requested me to draw up a will for him.

"Life is uncertain, my dear Harding," he said. "We are alive and well to-day, and perhaps to-morrow we are called. I should not like the money I have toiled for to be spent ruthlessly. I know of but one to whom I would care to trust it; in her hands I am sure it would be used wisely. I am about to make a very important investment, and I have turned all my real estate, bonds, etc., into cash to meet that purpose. It may be a fortnight or more before I make any headway in this new enterprise, and as I said before, we can never tell what a day may bring forth. I desire to make a will. The

total sum of my worldly effects is represented in the amount of seventy thousand dollars, which I intend to deposit in the bank to-day. It is dangerous to have so much as that in cash about one. But now in reference to the will. Draw it up in favor of Miss Margaret Lancaster. I wish to bequeath all I have to her in case of my death. Draw it up in such a manner that all formalities of the law shall be waived, and that the amount in cash could be paid over to her without delay.'"

CHAPTER XXXV.

"I AM GOING TO LIVE LIKE A GRAND LADY."

AURELIA could scarcely repress a cry of consternation that rose to her lips at this astounding information from the lawyer. She was too thoroughly dumfounded to utter one word if her very life had depended upon it.

"It seems," continued Mr. Harding, "this course upon the part of Dr. Thorpe was a wise one indeed, for upon his way to bank the money upon his person—my partner accompanying him—the doctor dropped dead from heart disease. I have to say in conclusion that all preliminaries of establishing your identity has been gone through with, and, in accordance with the last request of the deceased, we hold ourselves in readiness to pay you over the money.

"I add, as a matter of form only, that if you have any private papers or letters that we may put in conclusive evidence that you are the right party, I should like to examine them. As I said before, as a matter of form, my dear Miss Lancaster."

With trembling feet Aurelia fled from the room and up to Margaret's apartment. There were many books and souvenirs in the little black cloth trunk—all bearing Margaret's name. These she gathered up and took down to the lawyer.

He examined them one by one attentively—even a locket bearing her dead mother's face, with the words engraven on the case: "For my little Margaret. In her great hurry Margaret had entirely forgotten this locket, which she prized above all her earthly possessions.

"This is all straightforward enough—and the locket is

proof positive in establishing your identity as Margaret Lancaster, my dear young lady," he said, adding quietly, as he saw that she was trembling with excitement: "Sit down, please, and we will talk the matter calmly over. It is a great sum of money to be paid over in cash to so young a girl as yourself." And he told himself in his own mind that Dr. Thorpe had certainly made a fatal mistake in so ordering. He might better have invested the principal wisely, and allowed her the interest. He concluded, however, that the doctor must have been madly in love with the dazzling beauty of the girl, and had lost his head and his usual good judgment along with it. Heaven grant that this girl might be capable of using the great wealth, so suddenly thrust upon her, judiciously—but he almost doubted it, being a keen judge of human nature—and he could see that the love of pomp and splendor was the ruling passion of her life.

He had expected to see a plain, unassuming, modest young woman, dressed in the usual homely farm habiliments, not a dainty, beautiful creature like this.

For two hours or more Lawyer Hardingsat in the best room of the old farmhouse, talking this sudden change of fortune over with Aurelia under the impression that she was Margaret.

To her intense relief he had not heard the name of Aurelia even mentioned; and when she told him how he had come to her in the very time of her great need, now that Farmer Romaine and his good wife—her foster-parents—had but just passed away, and the farm was to fall into other hands on the morrow—he took in the situation of affairs as she presented them, at once, and sympathized with her deeply.

"Seeing the case is situated as it is, I should be greatly pleased if you would follow my suggestion, Miss Lancaster," he said, earnestly. "Come with me to New York—to my house, and make your home with my wife and daughter until you settle definitely your plans for the future. You are too young to be cast upon the world, possessed of so much money, without proper guidance. Have you no relative living?"

"No," replied Aurelia.

"I should suggest—even though you follow out my

suggestion of coming to New York with me, and to my home—that you at once engage the services of some elderly lady as chaperon.”

“When do you go to New York?” asked Aurelia faintly.

“I take the train within an hour,” he said consulting his watch, “I am *obliged* to go to attend to some important cases I have in court to-morrow morning.”

“Then I will accompany you,” declared Aurelia, the color coming and going fitfully on her face.

Oh, if she could but keep with him, and ward off every possibility of his learning the horrible deception about to be practiced upon him—keen and shrewd man of law though he was.

“Could you be ready in so short a time, Miss Lancaster?” he asked, aghast; “arrangements would have to be made for delivering the key of the house to the party who foreclosed the mortgage—the farm hands and servants——”

“There have been no farm hands here since Mrs. Romaine died,” she broke in eagerly, “and there is only the old servant that came until I could pack up my things preparatory to going to the village.”

“Have you friends there?” he asked, quickly.

“I was going there to try to get a place to teach in one of the village schools, or—or to be governess to little children.”

She had wit enough to know that he would think well of her if she told him that, and her shrewd surmise was quite correct.

“A more sensible young woman than I imagined,” was his mental comment. “I usually judge people pretty accurately by my first impressions. I seem to have been in error this time however.”

Aurelia’s first impulse, when the lawyer had told her all, was to cry out: “I am *not* Margaret Lancaster, I am Aurelia, her sister,” and then to tell him all; that Margaret had fled from the farmhouse only the night before, and why.

With the next breath came the thought, if he should search for Margaret and find her, would she accept this great wealth the gods had flung at her feet? She knew Margaret well enough to doubt it. Margaret would never

touch a penny of it. "Dr. Thorpe's money should never have been left to me," she was sure Margaret would say, "let every dollar of it go toward endowing a hospital. I would rather work for my money. I cannot accept this magnificent gift for myself."

Then suddenly as she sat there—the greatest temptation of her young life had come to her—a temptation that made her faint and giddy. A still small voice had whispered in her ear, this man believes *you* to be Margaret Lancaster—why undeceive him? He has this vast fortune all in cash to hand over to you. Take it. You are so poor you need wealth—poverty is so bitter. If you had wealth you could travel abroad and meet Randolph Clavering again.

That last thought influenced her more than all the rest.

Aurelia was not much over seventeen; girl-like, she looked only at the bright side of the picture, heedless of the darkness that lay beyond.

True, a revulsion of conscience did come to her once—the good and bad angels had a bitter fight for a human heart.

She could almost imagine that she would see Margaret standing at her bedside and whispering through the darkness of midnight:

"You are not what the world believes you—you are a miserable impostor who has stolen into your sister's place—an usurper of my rights! No good can come of such a living lie—exposure must follow, sooner or later."

But the thought of the magnificent fortune, and the possibility of it slipping through her fingers, made the hot blood course like fire through her veins; it was the chance of a lifetime, the good fortune that knocked but once at a person's door.

Why should she allow any scruple to interfere with such great prospective wealth?

"No one will ever find me out," she muttered below her breath. "I will take what the gods offer."

Aurelia ever afterward gave herself great credit for the way in which she had managed that affair so cleverly; she did not draw a safe breath until she was seated

in the train, and it was moving out from the village depot.

It seemed to Mr. Harding the most foolhardy piece of business that had ever passed through his hands—giving a young and inexperienced girl like this such an enormous sum in cash.

He was greatly provoked that Dr. Thorpe had made such an extraordinary will, and that, against his better judgment, he was bound to obey this behest to the very letter.

He saw but one way to mitigate this transaction, and that was to bring every influence to bear upon the girl to persuade her to invest it judiciously, and without delay.

Aurelia acquiesced to all his plans—before he had handed over to her the checks for the amount specified; but very soon after he began to understand that the girl had a will of her own, and a very strong one, too.

“I am very glad of your advice, Mr. Harding,” she said, leaning back in her cushioned seat and looking at him with two very black, sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks; “but I have already decided upon what investment I shall make first. Do you want to hear what that will be?”

Mr. Harding declared that he would be delighted to hear, and would give her all the benefit of his experience, if she choose to take it.

“Well, then,” said Aurelia, with a gay laugh, “the first thing that I invest in will be a diamond necklace at Tiffany’s, and a pair of bracelets to match. I never had any money before to spend as I pleased, and now that I find myself suddenly rich, I am going to live like a grand lady.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MARGARET’S SAD EXPERIENCE.

THERE was no heavier heart to be found the whole world over than the one which beat in Margaret Lancaster’s bosom as she turned her face from all she loved in the world, and set out to meet bravely the mysteries of the dark future.

Alone—penniless—thrown on her own resources in a cold, pitiless world.

In all the experiences of life there are few terrors that can compare with this to a young and timid girl. When she reached the great city of New York, where should she go? Which way should she turn?

On the train she bought a daily paper and eagerly turning to one of its advertising columns, sought to solve this question.

Carefully and patiently she ran her eye down the column of "Boarders Wanted."

"This will do," she sighed, reading the advertisement half aloud, which ran as follows:

"A widow lady would take a young girl as boarder while her daughter is absent for a few weeks. Money not so much of an object as companionship. Apply to Mrs. Hammond, No. — E. 12th Street."

There were many other desirable places, but this seemed to Margaret the most suitable.

"I could board with her at least two weeks," she ruminated, carefully counting over the few dollars she had left after paying her fare. "I must surely get something to do in that time."

It was late in the forenoon when she reached the great metropolis, and, limited though her means was, Margaret was wise enough to take a cab.

She knew it would have taken her hours and much patience otherwise, to have found her way through the streets of the great city.

Her timid ring at the bell brought a small, colored maid.

"Yes, Mrs. Hammond was at home," she said. "Would the young lady please walk this way?"

Margaret followed her up several flights of stairs, and at last the maid pushed open a door at the further end of the corridor, and Margaret found herself in a large, meagerly-furnished, dingy-room, and in the presence of Mrs. Hammond.

It must be confessed that Margaret did not take kindly to the woman at first sight. She could not tell why.

"I suppose you came to see about boarding, dearie,"

she said cajolingly, as she placed a chair for her visitor.

"Yes, madam," said Margaret. "I am a stranger in New York, and I am here to find employment. I shall be obliged to board some place for a fortnight at least, and I thought—if I could board cheap enough—this is just the kind of place I should like."

"How much did you expect to pay, dearie?" inquired Mrs. Hammond, blandly.

"I had no idea how much it is worth," replied Margaret, frankly; "but whatever you think is right I will pay—that is, if it comes within my means."

"Would you mind telling me candidly about how much money you have with you, dearie?" murmured Mrs. Hammond. "I would know then about how cheap I must board you."

"I have just eighteen dollars in my purse," replied the unsuspecting girl, flushing confusedly as she modestly made the admission, "and that must last me until I find employment, even though it should take me two or even three weeks. Do you think that out of the way?" faltered Margaret.

"No, not at all," returned Mrs. Hammond; "I am perfectly willing to take you for that amount, my dear. I think we shall get along famously. I think I can help you to just the very situation, too," she went on, enthusiastically—"a companion to an heiress; the pay is excellent, and there is literally nothing to do."

"Oh, I couldn't take any one's money for doing nothing," declared Margaret, earnestly, "indeed I could not."

"What a straight-laced creature you are to be sure!" cried Mrs. Hammond, with a laugh that grated harshly on Margaret's ears; "one would imagine you were a verdant country girl to hear you talk like that," she cried, fairly shaking her fat sides with loud laughter.

"I *am* from the country," returned Margaret, proudly, "and there we give the full value in labor for money received."

"Let me give you a little advice, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Hammond, still convulsed with laughter—"take all the money you can get, and do as little as you can; you will like the place, though, I feel sure. I will write you a line, and you can go and see for yourself if it

suits you; you look tired—you have had a long journey, you say; I would advise you to lie down and rest a bit the first thing you do. You can go to this place in the afternoon.”

Margaret *was* tired, and she was very grateful to Mrs. Hammond for her considerate thoughtfulness.

“This will be your room, my dear,” she said, showing Margaret into a small apartment that opened out from the one in which they had been seated, and which looked certainly more desolate and gloomy, if such a thing were possible.

“Lie down and rest for an hour or so; then I will call you, and, after you have a cup of nice hot tea, you’ll be as fresh as a June rose.”

It seemed to Margaret that, almost as soon as her tired head touched the pillow, she drifted off into dream-land. How long she slept she had no idea; she became suddenly conscious of a near presence, of being intently watched by a pair of steady, burning eyes, and she could distinctly feel short, stifled breathing on her cheek.

Margaret opened her eyes with a startled cry. Her sensation had been quite correct—some one was bending over her; it was Mrs. Hammond.

She drew back with a flushed, startled face.

“I only looked in to see how you were resting, dearie,” she said, confusedly; “rest a little longer—I’ll call you when lunch is ready.”

In obedience Margaret closed her eyes again, and the next moment she was sensible of a sweet, subtle odor pervading the room; opening her eyes with an effort, she saw that Mrs. Hammond had placed a vase of flowers on a small table in the center of the room.

Margaret told herself dreamily that she never remembered flowers to have that oppressive odor before; she could feel the weight of them on her brain, and once again, despite her efforts to collect her thoughts, she trailed off into a deep and dreamless sleep. Once again she could feel the subtle influence of some near presence about her, and a hand passed slowly and lightly over her face, but, try as hard as she could, she was powerless to arouse herself from the lethargy into which she had fallen.

Long hours dragged their slow lengths by; and when Margaret opened her eyes again it was night, and the moonlight was streaming in through the looped curtains of the window.

"Why, Mrs. Hammond must have forgotten all about calling me," she thought, in alarm, springing from the couch. But she found herself so dizzy she could hardly keep her feet, and her head ached terribly.

"I feel worse than I did before I lay down," she thought. "I guess cities do not agree with me. I feel stifled. The air seems thick and heavy."

Reaching for her dress, which she had removed, Margaret quickly donned it, and in doing so made, to her horror, the startling discovery that the pocket was turned wrong side out, and her *porte-monnaie*, in which she had had every cent she possessed in the wide world, *was missing*.

No words can picture Margaret's dismay, and wild grief, and what so terrible a loss meant to her.

"I have been—robbed. Heaven pity me!" she moaned, groping her way to the door, which she found ajar.

"Mrs. Hammond," she sobbed, making her way into the other apartment, and from thence into the hall. But no voice answered her—Mrs. Hammond was nowhere to be found.

Margaret's lamentation soon brought a gentleman and lady, from a lower flat, quickly to her side; and by dint of much questioning they gleaned, at length, the girl's story from her lips; and, as they listened, they looked at her with the profoundest pity.

"Poor child! Poor child!" repeated the gentleman in the deepest commiseration. "You have been made the victim of one of the most outrageous swindles—the cruelest wrong that ever cried out for justice. In a city like New York knavery may exist under the very roof with us, and we be unaware of it. The floors of this house—all save the lower one, which we occupy—are let out, ready furnished, to tenants by the week—for the accommodation of the working people hereabouts. The woman calling herself Mrs. Hammond, claiming that she was too poor to pay a whole week's rent in advance, succeeded in obtaining these two rooms, paying for

them by the day. She claimed to be looking for employment. She took them only this morning. Virtually the case amounts to just this: The woman rented these rooms by the day with just such an object in view. You walked into her net an unsuspecting victim. She has taken your money and—skipped. She is one of the many New York sharpers who live on their wits. Tomorrow she will be trying some new dodge in another part of the city. There's little use in attempting to trace them—not one out of a thousand is ever brought to justice. You have learned the lesson—beware of New York sharpers—at a dear price, my poor girl.”

“Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do, what shall I do?” sobbed Margaret, hysterically. “I do not know to whom I could turn in this dreadful hour.”

“You look like a pure, true young girl, my dear,” said the gentleman’s wife, touched to the heart by Margaret’s sorrow. “You shall come down to my rooms and stay with me a week, and I will do all in my power to help you to employment.”

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IN CENTRAL PARK.

FINDING a situation was not the easy task Margaret Lancaster had anticipated. She had answered every advertisement in the daily papers, but everywhere it was the same—no one seemed to want her. How was she to know that in nine cases out of ten it was because she was so young and fair?

One lady was more frank than the rest.

“I would take you for a companion,” she said, “but you would be very unhappy here. My—my husband is too fond of young and beautiful faces,” she added, with a flush and a long-drawn sigh.

Margaret was far too innocent to understand the drift of the lady’s thoughts.

“And,” she continued, with a painful effort at a smile, “I am obliged to take old and remarkably homely women for companions, and I usually find that their disposition corresponds with their faces. I am sorry, Miss Lancaster, but I cannot engage you.”

Thus it was day after day, and in home after home

that she visited, and the girl's heart was almost broken in consequence.

On the morrow the week which her new kind friends had invited her to stay would be up, and Margaret told herself she must not remain another day an object of their charity.

Walking the streets to find something to do—homeless, penniless, God knows, and God alone knows how bitterly hard it is—no wonder many poor young girls have been driven to desperate measures when they found themselves in a strait like this. The world narrows down to a grave, and death seems the only way of escape.

Margaret Lancaster was of a more patient, hopeful nature than most young girls, and the future was very dark and lowering, indeed, when she began to despair.

The hour came all too soon when Margaret told herself that she must not trespass on Mrs. Millar's kindness any longer.

"Have you a situation, then, at last, my dear?" said that lady, when the girl made known her intention of leaving her that afternoon; and it did not occur to her at the time that Margaret's answer was evasive.

When Margaret turned away from Mrs. Millar's door she could hardly restrain the scalding tears that seemed determined to force themselves through her long curling lashes, fairly blinding her eyes.

"Only Heaven knows what will become of me now," she sighed, adding, with a sob: "But I would die in that green park across the way before I would eat the bread of dependence for another meal. Surely the God that watches over the helpless little sparrows will not forget me, His child."

Margaret was just about to cross to the opposite pavement, when the sudden shout from the driver of a passing coach caused her to glance quickly up, and draw hastily back with a low cry.

But it was not the driver's surly words, "You'd better look out where you're going the next time, young woman—you came within an ace of being run over." It was not his words that caused Margaret to utter that startled cry—she never even heard them, her eyes were so intently riveted upon the occupant of the coach—a young

and beautiful girl robed in silk and glittering with costly diamonds that caught the sunlight and held it in myriad hues. But it was not even the magnificence of those wondrous jewels that held Margaret Lancaster spell-bound—it was the face that looked out at her from the coach window.

“Aurelia!” she cried, springing forward with clasped hands and amazed eyes; but, even while she uttered the name, the grand coach whirled on, its wheels flinging a cloud of dust over Margaret as it passed her by.

“Am I mad, or am I dreaming?” muttered Margaret, standing quite motionless on the cross-walk, and looking after the quickly disappearing vehicle. “That was surely Aurelia’s face—how could I make a mistake? There is no other face in this whole wide world so beautiful; and yet, how ridiculous to imagine for an instant that it could be she, in New York City, riding in a grand coach and dressed like a fine lady. No—no! at this moment she is far from me in that isolated little village nestling among the Virginia hills, Heaven bless her.”

And, standing there in the cold street, homeless and penniless, noble-hearted Margaret thanked God that she had left seventy-five dollars with Aurelia. Even though *she* was suffering, she felt that Aurelia was provided for, and that thought brought her a world of comfort.

Tired, desolate—ay, even hungry, Margaret slowly threaded her way over to the cool, green park, that invited rest, and sunk down, weak and faint, on one of the benches under a shade-tree, pondering over the wonderful resemblance of the beautiful, wealthy young lady in the coach to her far-off sister, Aurelia.

Slowly the golden sun rode his blazing chariot through the blue sky, and sunk at last out of sight in the western distance.

The dusk crept up and settled into the deeper darkness of night. One by one the stars came out and fixed themselves in the night sky. A young moon rose and hung like a slender, crescent jewel in the firmament, shedding a pale, soft light over the waving trees and the sleeping flowers below.

Still Margaret sat under the trees.

Great throngs passed her by—hurrying men and

women, and loitering lovers, and more than one looked at the white-faced girl sitting so listlessly on the bench, who was gazing intently into vacancy, and more than one wondered if she were ill.

But in the great metropolis sorrow and desolation abounds on every hand—people look with pity on unfortunates—and hurry on.

A policeman, in pacing his beat to and fro, had noticed Margaret when she had first entered the park and sunk down so wearily on the first seat she had come to.

As hour after hour passed by, and she still lingered, even after the night had fallen darkly around her, he began to think of the advisability of stopping to speak with her.

He had always been gruff enough in ordering loiterers to move on; but somehow he could not bring himself to give the usual order to the pale, silent young girl.

But, when nine o'clock rung out from the brazen throat of an adjacent belfry, he realized that the duty must be done, sooner or later.

He stopped before her, but she did not see him; she was not even aware of his presence until he laid his rough hand kindly on her shoulder, and asked quietly:

“What are you doing in the park so late, lass? It just struck nine; you have been here long hours.”

“Long hours!” repeated Margaret, wonderingly. “I—I—took no heed of time.”

“You have been here since noon, my girl. I am sorry to have to say it, but you must be moving on, you know.”

She raised her white, despairing face, with the night dew lying on it, entreatingly to his.

“I am doing no harm,” she answered, piteously, “please, let me stay here, I—— Oh, Heaven help me, I have no where to go.”

“Have you no home—no friends—or money, miss?” he asked, and his voice was husky with deep pity.

“No,” answered Margaret, with a sob, “neither friends, home, or money. I came to New York to find employment, but I have been unsuccessful, though I have searched every day; and now I am in despair. I sat

down here to think what I should do next, but somehow no thoughts would come to me; my senses seemed to wander so—I quite think that I must have slept—I imagined I was back in the old farmhouse where I spent so many happy years, and that Ger——” She stopped suddenly, as she saw the man wipe away tears from his eyes with his great rough hand.

“Are you crying because you are sorry for me?” asked Margaret, in wonder.

The officer recovered his composure by a great effort.

“Yes, I am sorry for you, miss,” he replied, “more sorry for you than you can imagine. Shall I tell you why?”

“Yes,” returned Margaret, dreamily, “if you like.”

For a moment the great, burly policeman was silent, then he turned slowly from Margaret, saying, huskily: “I know just how to pity you, my lass, because a young girl, with just such a story as yours, changed the whole current of my life not many years ago. It happened in this way:

“I was down at the Battery then; I went on duty at six in the evening, patrolling the river-front until six the next morning.

“One evening a young girl came to the park, and like you, sat motionless on one of the benches for long hours. I thought she could not be one of the emigrants from Castle Garden; there was something about her too genteel-like for that.

“By eleven o’clock the crowds that usually congregate about the place on a summer’s night, had gradually dispersed; still the young girl made no move to quit the place, and my curiosity was aroused by the furtive glances she began to take at last on all sides of her. I drew back in the shadow of the trees and watched her.

“At length, observing no one for the moment in sight, she crept quickly up to the river-brink, and peered down into the waters; and, we policemen know too well what that means, and with a little heart-broken cry that would have pierced your very soul to have heard, she made a leap down into the dark waves. But, thanks be to Heaven, she never reached them, I was too quick for her; in the very nick of time I caught her, and drew her back to the world she was so bent upon

leaving, and though the poor thing struggled desperately to free herself from my clasp, I held her fast in my grasp."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GERALD ROMAINÉ'S RETURN.

THE officer paused a moment in his story, and then continued:

"'What were you about to do, child?' I cried, in horror—for she was little more than a child in years. 'Is life so hard with you that you rush headlong to destroy it?'"

"'Let me go!' she sobbed. 'Yes, life is so hard and bitter I want to die. Why were you so cruel as to bring me back to a hard and pitiless world, that I was so anxious to escape from?'"

"'Why is life so bitter with you?' I asked. 'Won't you tell me, my poor girl?' And as I spoke, I drew her further and further away from the deadly brink of the treacherous water.

"'Yes, I will tell you—why I should not?' she sobbed, dropping down on the bench again, and weeping as though her heart would break. 'I am starving—yes, starving! Does that shock you—that a human being should starve in a land of plenty?—in a great city, where women spend fortunes on senseless roses, and in glittering diamonds, and on every extravagant thing they see? I tried to get work in the mills—but everywhere it was the same old story, they had all the hands they wanted. So what could an honest girl do then but get out of a world that had no place in it for her to earn her bread? Why suffer the pangs of hunger another hour, when one leap, and a moment's struggle would bring me relief? When God takes from the little sparrows the means of getting food, what wonder that they lay their little breasts down on the frozen snowdrifts—to die? Why should not God's children seek death, too, rather than endure starvation's pangs?'"

"I could never tell you, miss, the feeling that shot through my heart as I listened. All in an instant a strange thought took possession of me, and held me in

thrall as completely as though it had grown into my heart by slow degrees for long years.

“‘Do not be surprised at what I am going to say to you, miss,’ I said, very quietly. ‘I know it is very sudden-like, but I mean it from the very depths of my heart—marry me, and I will take you home with me at once. I will try and make you so happy that you will forget that there is such a thing in the world as hunger.’”

“‘You—really mean it?’ she asked, in wonder.

“‘Yes!’ I replied, huskily.

“Well, to make a long story short, she married me, God bless her, and she never had cause to regret it. All day long she goes singing about my house, as blithe as a bird. When I get home from duty, she is always watching for me at the window, and runs to me and welcomes me with a kiss.

“I have never told a human being save yourself, miss, that I married her from the street, so to speak, and, like herself, I have never regretted it, and we live a happy life.

“Now you can see why it touches me so deeply to hear a young girl say she has been walking the streets searching for work, and can find nothing to do. I always remember my Nelly.

“Now I will tell you what I’ll do, miss,” he went on energetically, “I’ll take you home along with me, and Nelly will cheer you up; a few hours with her will put new life into you, and new spirits.”

But Margaret drew back.

“You are very kind,” she said, huskily, “but I cannot be a burden on you; I——”

The sentence was never finished; with a low cry Margaret had fallen at his feet in a deep swoon.

In an instant he had raised her in his stalwart arms. It was very fortunate that Dr. Briscoe was passing just at that moment.

The officer called to him lustily. The doctor took in the situation at a glance—quite before the policeman had time to explain it.

“It will be a bad case of brain-fever; you had better take her to the hospital across the way,” he declared.

This suggestion was carried out; and when morning broke, the golden sunshine streamed in upon a flushed

face, tossing restlessly to and fro upon the white pillow, and upon two blue, feverish eyes, in which the light of reason had flickered out.

Joy and sorrow alike mattered little enough to Margaret Lancaster now. She had been stricken with a dangerous fever.

"Of course we must hope for the best," said Dr. Briscoe to the nurse, when he looked into the ward for a few brief moments; "but it's a very dangerous case. If the girl ever leaves that bed alive, it will be a miracle."

"Poor young thing!" said the nurse, bending pityingly over Margaret; "she is so young to die!"

As Dr. Briscoe ran hurriedly down the hospital steps to the pavement, the crowd jostled him roughly against a gentleman who was passing.

Both turned to apologize for the seeming rudeness, and the next instant both had sprung toward each other with extended hands, exclaiming, in pleased surprise:

"Dr. Briscoe!"

"Why, as I live," cried the doctor, "if it isn't my old school chum, Gerald Romaine!"

"Why, Gerald, old boy," he continued, wringing the other's hand, "bless me, I heard only the other day that you were out in Egypt, Brazil, the Sandwich Islands, or some equally out-of-the-world place. Did you drop down suddenly from the clouds Jules Verne fashion?"

"I have been to Brazil; I returned only last week," said Gerald.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"I WILL NEVER FORGIVE HIM FOR THOSE WORDS."

"COME down to the club and dine with me, my dear boy!" cried the doctor, delightedly, adding: "There's not a fellow living that I would care more to see than yourself. Come, let us talk over old times!"

And nothing loath, Gerald accepted the invitation.

"This evening I have cards for a grand reception, to be held at one of the swell houses on Fifth Avenue—would you like to accompany me?" asked Dr. Briscoe, as he and Gerald sat over their wine and walnuts a little later. "The host is a very clever fellow," he went on; "and his bride, to use one of the old college phrases, 'is

just stunning.' She is called the prettiest woman in New York. Clavering is a lucky dog, to have found such a *rara avis*; but come, and you shall see for yourself. Their receptions are occasions to be remembered. You are sure to meet the best people of New York at them."

"What did I understand you to say the gentleman's name was?" asked Gerald, setting down his glass with an unsteady hand—his lips paling under his fair mustache.

"Clavering—Randolph Clavering," responded the doctor briskly. "Do you know him?—a capital fellow."

"No," said Gerald, "we have never met. I—I—thank you for the invitation, Briscoe, but I cannot accompany you to-night. I have made a previous appointment to see a man at my hotel on business to-night."

"Sorry," returned Briscoe. "But by the way, is it true, Gerald, that you have made the fabulous stakes down in Brazil that the papers credit you with?"

"Yes," said Gerald, wearily. "I have been fortunate beyond my wildest expectations, but fortune has come—to me—too late."

"Why, what do you mean, Romaine, old fellow? I never knew you to talk like that. What's come over you?"

"I am alone in the world, with no one to share my fortune with now," returned Gerald. "To be brief, you know I went down there on a hazardous speculation with my patents. A poor man has nothing to lose, you know. For long months I was too discouraged with the prospects to write home and tell them of failure after failure. Suddenly my patent for sinking shafts was applied, and from that moment my success was assured. All my other patents were brought into demand on railroads and in the mines, and from the direst poverty I suddenly awoke to find myself a rich man. I invested largely in mines, and quadrupled my fortune in no time. As soon as I could put my business into shape to leave it, I took a flying trip home, intending to take the old folks back with me, and—and——"

"A wife," cut in Dr. Briscoe, with a sly little laugh.

"And two who had been like sisters in the family," continued Gerald. "But mark what follows. On my return to the little village where I had lived—or rather

on a farm near it—I found within the year both father and mother had passed away—the farm had been seized to satisfy a petty mortgage—and the two girls I speak of, who had lived in our family for years, had gone, none knew whither. They did not even leave a line behind by which I might trace them. I think I know now what has become of them,” he added, bitterly. “One has married the wealthy man of her choice, and has taken her sister home to live with her. As I said before, my wealth has come to me too late.”

Gerald Romaine paced his room at the hotel for long hours that night.

“From this time on, Aurelia shall never live another hour in my thoughts, now that she is Randolph Clavering’s wife, he ruminated. “She never loved *me*.

“ ‘What care I how fair she be
If she be not fair to me?’ ”

And once again in his sorrowful meditations—and for the second time in his life—his mind reverted to Margaret—the fair, patient, gentle girl who had loved him with so true a love, when he was only poor Gerald Romaine, the farmer’s son, toiling late and early over his hopeless inventions.

He wondered vaguely if, during his long absence, gentle Margaret had met any one else whom she had learned to love.

He thought not. Margaret was a girl to love but once in a lifetime.

And, somehow, that thought brought Gerald Romaine great comfort.

When Aurelia—for it was indeed she—had looked from the coach-window and found herself face to face with Margaret, her fear of being recognized by her sister was so great that she nearly screamed aloud in her terror.

“Drive on quick, John,” she cried, hoarsely, as soon as she could find her voice, “turn the nearest corner, then straight ahead as fast as you can go.”

Although she strained her ears to listen, as the coach clattered over the pavement, she did not hear what she had expected to hear, Margaret’s voice calling, “Aurelia! Aurelia!”

"It is possible that she did not recognize me," muttered the heartless girl, leaning back among the soft velvet cushions and breathing freer. "Dear me, what a narrow escape I have had. I wonder what Margaret was doing near the park. I shall never dare ride in that vicinity again in anything like peace."

By the time Aurelia reached the home of Mr. Harding, the lawyer, where she was stopping, she had quite regained the roses that had vanished from her cheeks with her fright.

"Ah, here you are, Margaret," said Alice Harding. "I have been looking everywhere for you; I did not know you were out riding. The last mail brought us quite a number of invitations to different social affairs; I want you to come and help me decide as to which one out of three you would care most to accept for next Wednesday evening. There's a *musical* at Miss Robinson's down the avenue, a theater party to see Coquelin, and a reception at Mrs. Thornby's, in honor of her sister, who but recently married young Mr. Clavering, of Virginia."

"Mr.—who!" cried Aurelia, hoarsely.

"Mr. Randolph Clavering," repeated Miss Alice, serenely, adding—"do you know him?"

"I—I—met him once," stammered Aurelia.

She did not utter a cry or a moan when she reached her own room. It seemed to her that her heart had turned suddenly to stone, and was incapable of any emotion. Randolph Clavering—married; another woman called him—husband! The pain of it was so bitter she could not realize it. It almost seemed to her that she should wake up and find it some horrible dream.

"If he could give me up so easily, without one pang, he never loved me," she cried, clinching her hands together bitterly.

Cold and soulless as Aurelia Lancaster was, she had loved this man with all the deep absorbing love her shallow nature was capable of, and her soul was cut to the quick by his marriage with another.

At first she thought death would be easier to bear than meeting him again under such conditions, but after awhile she grew calmer.

"I—I—will go to Mrs. Thornby's," she told herself

at length with a wild, hysterical laugh. "I—I—will show him that I do not care; no, I do not care. It will be better to get the meeting over first as last. I—I—can nerve myself to the occasion."

It was pitiful to see how anxious Aurelia was when that eventful Wednesday evening rolled around.

"Felice," she said to her little French maid, "I want you to make me as beautiful as a dream to-night."

"*Oui*, mademoiselle," answered the girl, adding as she looked admiringly on the flushed face of her young mistress: "That will not be hard to do."

At last the task was accomplished, and it *was* a task, for Aurelia was so hard to please.

Nothing could have been more perfect than the white lace dress that fell in graceful folds about the Diana-like, slender figure.

The white neck and bare arms shone through it like polished marble, and the neck and beautiful head rose out of it like a perfect flower.

Dark passion roses nestled amid the white lace on her breast, and one small bud was twined among the dark brown curls that lay on the white forehead.

The brown eyes that looked back at her from the long French mirror glowed like stars unnaturally brilliant.

The beautiful mouth and dimpled cheeks were as red as the crimson heart of the roses on her breast.

Aurelia drew a long, sobbing breath.

Of what avail was her beauty now? She had lost the love of the one man on earth whom she cared for.

"Will I do, Felice?" she asked wearily.

"Do!" cried the French girl, enraptured. "Oh, mademoiselle, you look like an angel."

A harsh laugh fell from those lips so like crimson flowers.

"I feel like a veritable d—l!" she cried. "Felice"—and she turned to the girl sharply—"there is something I want you to do for me—something I want you to get, but no one must ever know about it."

Felice declared that she was willing to lay down her life in mademoiselle's service; she could be silent as the grave on any subject her young mistress wished her to keep secret.

"I think I can trust you. You are a shrewd girl,

Felice. When I explain to you what I want, you will know exactly the name for it, and where to get it.

“I once read a strange story, and it impressed me greatly; it was of a woman whose husband had left her, and of course she had to get a divorce from him, and not long after there was to be a reception, and after she had sent her acceptance, she heard that he was coming there with a bride.

“She knew this would be a sweet morsel for her dear five hundred friends to see the meeting between the deserted wife and the haughty young bride; but she told herself that though her heart should break there, and the blood leave it drop by drop, she would face the ordeal, and she *did* face it, Felice. She arrayed herself in the dress her husband had loved best to see her in in the old days, and went to the reception.

“Those who knew her looked at her in wonder. They had never seen her eyes so bright and sparkling, her cheeks and lips so flushed. The keenness of her wit, her ready repartee and gay, jolly laugh was the talk of the room.

“She clasped the white hand of the woman who had taken her husband’s love from her—her own never trembling—and leaned over and laid a passionate kiss on the bride’s pouting lips; but she did that because she knew, poor soul, full well whose lips would take that kiss from them, Felice.

“She met her husband’s eyes bent searchingly upon her, and man-like, he was chagrined that his apparent empire over her heart was over, for he could not read in that happy face one regret; he could not imagine that those brilliant eyes had shed one tear for him.

“At last the miserable farce was over, and, smiling to the very last, she was driven away in her carriage. That night, in disrobing her, her maid saw a tiny vial fall from her bosom to the floor.

“‘Oh, madam, is it poison!’ she gasped in horror.

“A sigh that was more of a sob fell from the lady’s lips.

“‘No,’ she said; ‘it is a powerful French drug, my dear—a drug that, while its influence lasted, raised my spirits up to the height of heaven; made me forget heart-pain and all my weary woe; sharpened my intel-

lect, gave me brilliant forays of imagination, and purchased that for which I would have given my soul—happiness, even in the face of all I had been called upon to endure—a draught from the waters of Lethe.’

“I want to get some of the same thing, Felice,” continued Aurelia, eagerly; “can you get it for me at any price? You are very clever, Felice; you must get it—somewhere.”

“I think I know what you want, mademoiselle,” nodded the girl. “I will try and get it.”

No one who ever saw Aurelia Lancaster that night ever forgot her in her brilliant young beauty. She literally carried the men and women, gathered at the reception, by storm.

The little bride, who had heard her husband’s honest confession about Aurelia, grew pale to the lips when she saw her glorious rival, and she shrank closer to her young husband’s side.

“Oh, Randolph!” she cried, piteously, stealing her little, cold, white, trembling hand into his, the great tears hanging on her lashes, “how could you ever have married me, after knowing and loving a gloriously beautiful woman like that?”

Randolph Clavering pressed the little rose-leaf of a hand reassuringly.

“Do not think of it, Dora, my darling,” he whispered. “My love for Miss Lancaster is a thing of the past; now I love only you, dear. Try to believe me, and be happy and trustful and contented in your husband’s perfect love. The love of the glaring sunlight for some men—I love best the little lonely star that other eyes are not gazing upon.”

He did not see the palm-leaves near him quiver; neither of them knew that this loving colloquy had been overheard by the tall, queenly girl, who had stolen there for a moment’s rest, and to take another draught from a tiny vial hidden in her bosom.

Randolph Clavering and his young wife passed from the conservatory; then the leaves of the palm-trees were parted by a white hand, and Aurelia Lancaster looked after them with a face white as death.

“I will never forgive him for those words,” she mut-

tered. "I shall make him rue the day he uttered them, so help me Heaven!"

CHAPTER XL.

THE HEIRESS OF LANCASTER.

AMONG the many gentlemen present was one who had never taken his eyes from Aurelia's face from the first moment she had entered the room.

He crossed over quickly to his hostess.

"My dear madame," he said, "who is the charming mademoiselle in the white lace dress over by the jardiniere yonder? I should like so much to be presented to her."

"Half the gentlemen in the room have come to me within the last half hour that Miss Lancaster has been here, with the same request," laughed Mrs. Thornby, good humoredly. "She is quite an *ingenue*," she declared; "she has no idea of the sensation she is creating—quite a *furor*—but then I do not wonder at it, she is a gloriously beautiful girl. Come with me, Count Lorenzo—we must make our opportunity to claim the beauty's attention."

The next moment they were standing before Aurelia.

Something in the glance of this handsome foreigner's dark, magnetic eyes made her shiver as she acknowledged the introduction, and the next instant Aurelia found herself alone with him.

"Will you come and have an ice, Miss Lancaster?" he asked, proffering his arm.

"No," replied Aurelia; "you are very kind, I thank you; but I prefer not just now."

"I insist!" he whispered in her ear. "Do you hear me, I—insist, I say. Do not make a scene; come to the conservatory with me; I have something to say to you."

Something in the man's peremptory manner checked her anger and amazement—holding her fairly spell-bound; and, before she could find her voice to reply to this astonishing impertinence, the count had drawn her kidded hand through his arm, and was drawing her forcibly toward the conservatory.

Placing her on a seat near the fountain, he stood be-

fore her, gazing intently down into her beautiful, angry face.

“May I ask the meaning of this extraordinary conduct, sir?” cried Aurelia, scorning the proffered seat, and springing to her feet, she faced him, white with suppressed wrath.

“Pray be calm,” returned the count. “I cannot endure to see you in a passion like that, for you remind me too forcibly of your mother.”

And, as he uttered the words, a very disagreeable smile curved his dark mustached lips; but the effect they produced upon Aurelia was startling.

“You—you knew my mother?” she asked, gazing at him with wondering, dilated eyes.

“So I said,” he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. “It is of her, and of yourself, that I brought you here to speak. I have searched the world over to find you, and to-night I am at last successful. At the first glance I had of you, I knew I stood face to face with Aurelia Lancaster’s daughter—an infant when I last held you in my arms—but now grown to womanhood.”

“Will you tell me who you are?” gasped the girl, a strange, unfathomable chill creeping about her heart.

“Does not your own instinct tell you that, girl?” he said.

“No,” she panted, recoiling from him. “Tell me at once, in Heaven’s name, who you are and how you came to know my mother!”

“I am your father, Aurelia!” he replied, quietly, “and the husband of beautiful, faithless Aurelia Lancaster, who fled from me eighteen years ago.

“If you would hear the story of who and what you are, listen.

“It is best that you should know. I am a desperate man, but, bad as I am, I am your father. I compel your obedience, though I may not, when I have finished, command your respect.”

“I do not believe that you are my father,” cried Aurelia, vehemently. “You are not what I have dreamed he was like.”

“You will find when you are my age that dreams and realities are widely different,” he said, grimly. “I will simply state, to save time in argument, that I have con-

clusive proofs—I always carry them about me. Here is your mother's picture," he said, touching a miniature locket he wore attached to his vest-chain.

The golden lid flew back, and the face that looked up from the ivory was so like Aurelia's own, that the mirror had shown her over and over again, that she fairly held her breath. Beneath the face was the name Aurelia and the year 18—, which showed that the portrait must have been taken some score of years or more ago.

One by one the girl examined the proofs he offered. Yes, beyond a doubt this man was her father, otherwise they would never have been in his possession.

"Now for a *resume* of that past," he said, grimly.

"To begin with, and to state facts as briefly as possible, I will say I married your mother for her beauty, and she married me for—position.

"There was one secret of my past life that I had thought to keep from her. Two years before I married your mother I met and loved another—a fair-haired village maid whom I wooed and won and made my wife. To my lovely Margaret I gave all the love that there was in my fickle heart to ever give. When my parents heard of my marriage to my simple, timid Margaret, they used every means to separate us, and—alas! how shall I own it?—they influenced me at last to desert her. My Margaret faded like a lily; she loved me too well to exist without me, she wrote me. I would have returned to her, for there was a still more urgent reason that I should do so. Margaret wrote me in the letter about our little daughter, but my relentless parents held me back. Margaret pined away, and they laid her beneath the daisies on the green sloping hillside that we had roamed over so often in those happy days when Margaret was my bride.

"My parents put the child—little Margaret—in the humble family of an old nurse. No one knew of my marriage, and the affair was hushed up. They soon picked out another bride for me, and as her beauty infatuated me, I married her, thinking to keep the story of the past a secret—a secret from her forever.

"A year later *you* were born, and all the love of the mother was withdrawn from me and centered in you, her child, for whom she had great hopes. The chief ambi-

tion of her life was to live to see the day that you should reign as heiress of the house of Lancaster. This suddenly brought me to my senses. You could never reign as that I well knew, because of Margaret's babe. But I dreaded breaking the news to her. I knew her fiery temper so well, and this intelligence would fairly take the heart from her body.

"One day I was stricken ill almost unto death; in that hour I knew I must make restitution of her rights to Margaret's little child. Then the whole truth came out; I sent for baby Margaret, the heiress of the house of Lancaster.

"They said Aurelia, my young wife, raved like a veritable maniac; I have read in the traditions of the house of Lancaster that upon the dark-eyed daughters a curse rests—heavy and deep; and the curse had fallen on my little Aurelia, whom I would have saved with my life.

"While I lay ill unto death, she made me promise that the world should never know that the child was not the heiress of Lancaster until the day that you were of age. I think," he continued reflectively, "that she must have had the thought in her mind that Margaret's babe would never live to claim her inheritance, when I told her how frail were both mother and child, and then you, her idolized little Aurelia, would be heiress to all the broad domains of the Lancasters.

"From the hour I gave my wife that solemn promise, ill as I was, I noticed a sudden change in her. Night and day she seemed to be brooding over something she had on her mind. I found out what it was all too soon.

"On the day that I rose from my sick-bed, they broke the intelligence to me that Aurelia had fled, taking with her her little child, and—Margaret's babe.

"From that day to this I have searched for her, never finding trace of her until to-night. Now I ask this: Where is your mother, and where is Margaret, my child?"

"My mother is beyond all reach of your anger or revenge," said the girl slowly. "She is dead! I can take you to her grave."

"And my little Margaret?" he asked hoarsely. "My Margaret's child, who is now the heiress of Lancaster Manor?"

"You might as well search for a grain of sand on the

seashore—a blade of waving grass on the hill side, as to look for Margaret.”

“Is she dead, too?” he asked hoarsely.

And quick as thought, Aurelia answered:

“Yes.”

A sigh broke from her father’s lips. It never occurred to him to doubt her.

“Then, in that case, you, Aurelia, are the heiress to Lancaster Manor, one of the finest estates in England,” he said; “but tell me the story of your life, from first to last. How you came to be living in luxury like this?”

She gave him the story in detail truthfully enough, until she came to the episode of Margaret’s departure from the farm. She gave her father to understand that Margaret had died at this period, and that the money Dr. Thorpe had so strangely bequeathed, had been left to herself, instead of Margaret.

“Yours has been a strange, eventful experience, child,” he said, when she had concluded; “but henceforth you shall know no more sorrow, your path will be one of roses.”

CHAPTER XLI.

THE LION OF THE HOUR.

A GUILTY flush swept over Aurelia’s face, leaving it as white as her dress.

He noticed it.

“The excitement of this interview is too much for you, my dear,” he said, in alarm. “Let me get you a glass of wine—an ice—something. You are trembling, too.”

“You may get me a glass of wine, papa, if you will,” she said.

And leaving her there he hastened on his mission.

It was during his absence that Randolph Clavering and his young bride passed through the conservatory, and Aurelia heard the conversation between them related in a previous chapter.

When her father returned he found her standing, leaning heavily against one of the slender palm-trees, with an expression on her face that he never afterward forgot.

“Are you going to claim me as your daughter, papa,” she asked—“now—to-night?”

“I have been thinking over the matter,” he returned slowly, “and have concluded that it would be unwise, for the reason that it would but revive the old scandal of my wife Aurelia’s flight long years ago. I am traveling in this country under the name of Count Lorenzo. No, you can make your arrangements quietly, and at once, to go to England. I will cross on the same steamer with you, and when you reach your native shores you must take your rightful place in the world at once. Do these arrangements meet with your approval?”

“Entirely,” declared Aurelia, her eyes brightening.

“Next to love, revenge is sweet,” some writer has said, and Aurelia found it extremely pleasant to imagine Randolph Clavering’s surprise, and his chagrin in not having secured her, when he found her the petted, courted heiress of some great English estate.

Excitement was to Aurelia the wine of life.

She even found herself forgetting Randolph Clavering, in weaving golden day dreams of the rosy future.

She would find plenty of adoring lovers over there. Why, there would be lords, earls, perhaps even dukes, for her to choose from.

“How lucky it was that I claimed old Dr. Thorpe’s money instead of turning it over to Margaret,” she thought exultantly. “Fate has worked everything like a charm for me.”

“How do you like the wealthy old count, my dear?” asked Mrs. Thornby, the hostess, of Aurelia, a little later. “I see”—she added archly—“he is monopolizing very much of your attention, much to the chagrin of your many other admirers.”

Aurelia shook back her dark curls with a gay laugh, but was not communicative.

“The lion of the evening is not here,” said Mrs. Thornby, “and it is so disappointing. So many young girls are here for the express purpose of meeting him.”

“Some great foreigner, I presume?” smiled Aurelia.

“On the contrary, an American—and a very modest and unassuming young man, too, to be worth several millions of money,” returned Mrs. Thornby. “I like him better than most young men society is filled up

with. The young girl who gets him will get a bargain, I assure you."

"Who is this paragon?" inquired Aurelia, languidly. And the answer nearly took her breath away.

"A Mr. Gerald Romaine."

"There must be some mistake," cried Aurelia. "I knew a Gerald Romaine; but it cannot be the same one. He—the one I knew—was poor as a church mouse."

"This Mr. Romaine is a wealthy mine owner of Brazil. I should not be surprised if it was the young man you knew. I have heard that less than a year ago he went down there a poor man, with a few patents—some articles he had invented—and by chance they happened to fill a public want. They were utilized in the mines and on the railroads, and in no time he found money rolling in to him by the thousands; he bought mines and quadrupled his money. Now he bids fair to be one of the richest men in America before he is five-and-thirty. The beauty of the whole affair is, as I said before, he is as plain and modest a young man as you ever met—his great good fortune has not spoiled him."

Aurelia had listened with breathless attention. Yes, of course it was Gerald, and no other.

It seemed most miraculous to her that the miserable old patents, as she had always called them, had turned to fabulous wealth in Gerald's hands. And to think that Gerald, whom all the world was now wanting, loved *her*—Gerald, with all his millions.

She resolved to seek him out at once. He had taken new value in her eyes; and, if she found that it was true—that he really had been successful, and was now worth great mines in Brazil, she told herself that she would marry him.

Of course he must have been to the farm in search of her, and how disappointed he must have been when he found her gone, and that he could find no trace of her.

"Good fortune is pouring in upon me," she thought. "I will marry Gerald and have his great wealth, and I will go to England, too, and claim the vast inheritance my mother intended that I should have."

Even in this moment the heartless girl did not say to herself:

"I will give Margaret her rightful inheritance in Eng-

land—give to her also the money Dr. Thorpe left her, and be satisfied with Gerald's fabulous wealth, and Gerald's love."

Perhaps if she had not been so pitiless toward hapless Margaret, Heaven might have shown her more mercy in the end.

As it was, her aim was to grasp *all*, and leave Margaret—nothing.

She had always supposed Margaret and herself to have been twins, and, of course, of the same parentage; it was a surprise to know that Margaret was older than she by two years, and, above all, a great surprise to know that her mother was only an English peasant girl, as she phrased it.

Now, she told herself, she could really understand why she and Margaret were so different—as widely different as the gloriously brilliant stars in the sky and the simple field daisies—earth stars—that reared their timid heads from the dust of the roadside.

A peasant girl's daughter! Ah, that accounted for Margaret's meekness and servility—"Peasant would be peasant, though you clothe him in a coat of diamonds!"

It came natural to Margaret, after all, to toil for her daily bread—she was in her natural sphere; while *she* herself, born of aristocratic parents, was a lady, and more fitted to rule over those vast English domains than timid, modest Margaret.

She could even smile patronizingly on Randolph Clavering and his bride now, as they passed her by. Triumph blazed from her flashing, dark, splendid eyes, and curling lip—in the proudly-poised head and flushed cheeks.

She could already imagine two countries paying homage to her—the grandest people of the two worlds bowing at her lovely feet!

Yes, she must see Gerald at once, she told herself. As for Gerald Romaine there was an excellent reason as to why he was not at the grand reception that evening.

On searching for Dr. Briscoe that morning, the lad in charge of his down-town office had directed him to the hospital, where, he told him, he would be sure to find

the doctor between the hours of ten and twelve, A. M., and thither Gerald bent his steps.

“I am afraid I shall not be able to keep my appointment with you, Gerald,” he said. “I have a case to-day that needs extra attention. I shall do everything in my power to save her. It is a sad thing to see a fair young girl die. If a woman ever bore the stamp of a saint or an angel on her face, this one does. As well as being a tinker at inventions, in the old college days, you used to be something of an artist, Gerald. And any man with an artist’s eye could not help being struck with the heavenly beauty of this fair young girl. I use the word heavenly advisedly, because there is more of the saint in her face than the taint of earth.”

“What seems to be the matter with the young girl?” asked Gerald, interested, even in spite of the slight concern he took in women nowadays.

“One of the policemen found her ill and starving—ay, starving—in the park a few days since. She was brought here unconscious, and has been delirious ever since. We do not know her name, or where her friends could be communicated with—in fact, nothing whatever about the poor, forlorn creature.”

“Starving! and in a land of plenty!” cried Gerald, with deep emotion. “Briscoe,” he said, in a low, husky voice, “let everything in the power of mortals be done for this young girl, and I will stand the expense. I can put my money to no better use than doing good to my fellow-creatures. I cried out to Heaven last night that money was dross—that it was useless—but I see that that was a mistake; rightly used, it is a blessing from God.”

“Will you come in and see this young girl, Gerald?” asked Dr. Briscoe, much moved by his friend’s impulsive generosity.

“No,” returned Gerald, modestly, “I think not, my dear Briscoe.”

CHAPTER XLII.

“I DID NOT THINK YOU WOULD CARE WHAT BECAME OF ME.”

“You are missing a sight of the prettiest face the sun ever shown on, Gerald, my boy—if you refuse to see this young girl,” continued Dr. Briscoe, earnestly. “You are such a beauty worshiper, I wish I could induce you to change your mind.”

“If you really wish me to see her so very much, why, I don’t mind,” returned Gerald, smiling.

Arm-in-arm the two friends passed down the long corridor together, and the doctor paused at length before Room 24, the door of which was ajar, and they both entered.

A nurse stood before the bed on which the patient lay, hiding the girl from view, from the doorway.

They took one step forward, and at the sound, the face on the pillow was turned restlessly toward them.

One glance, then a terrible cry broke from Gerald Romaine’s lips:

“My God! am I mad—or dreaming? It—is—Margaret!”

And in an instant he was kneeling before the white couch.

“Do you know her, Romaine?” exclaimed the doctor in wonder, looking sharply at Gerald’s white, pained face.

“Yes,” he answered simply, with something very like tears shining in his brave, honest eyes, and in a few brief sentences he disclosed Margaret’s identity to Briscoe. “I have every reason to believe that her sister, Aurelia, married a wealthy young man recently,” he continued, slowly, “and therefore I—I—cannot account for Margaret’s being found sitting in the park suffering from hunger. My God, I can hardly realize it,” and tender-hearted Gerald Romaine laid his head against the fair face on the pillow, and wept like a child.

The blue eyes that had so often looked at him with love, now turned toward him in puzzled, mute wonder.

“Perhaps it would be best for my patient if I leave them alone together,” the doctor thought; “Gerald may

be able to arouse her from the dangerous lethargy into which she is gradually falling."

Beckoning the nurse to follow him, and signifying his intention of returning shortly, Dr. Briscoe quitted the apartment.

Gerald's grief was so great he did not even notice their departure.

"Margaret," he whispered, earnestly, clasping the little, thin, white hand, wandering so restlessly to and fro on the counterpane, "do you not know me?"

But in the dreamy gaze of the blue eyes that met his there was no gleam of recognition.

She did not attempt to draw her hand from his clasp, but let it lie in his firm grasp, just as a little child might do.

How white and wan her face was, and he noticed too, the deep lines of pain about her lips.

"Sweet, gentle Margaret, who has loved me so well; ah, how cruel to find her thus," Gerald moaned.

Her lips moved, and he bent his fair, handsome head nearer still to hear the words she uttered.

"It is so cold in the park," she sighed, "oh, so cold and dreary, since the light of the sun has gone down. It is just about the time we used to light the lamps at the dear old farm. Am I—the miserable girl sitting in this park under the cold trees—am I the same girl who used to be so happy in those other days before *she* came and took Gerald's love from me?"

Hearing Margaret go on in this strain was more than Gerald could well endure; every word was a bitter reproach to him, for his share in making her life so unhappy in the past.

He could not check the thoughts that fell so pathetically from her lips. He could only listen in sorrowful silence to her words.

"Oh," she moaned, catching her breath with a little hard sob, "I often think God is angry at the wish in my heart that I could live those old days over again, for he has said: 'Let the dead past rest.'"

"Was it best for Heaven to send her there, with her beautiful face, to take him from me? Why should Heaven have held to the lips of one the wine of life, and to the other—the lees? Why should God have made

her so fair and me so plain—was it fair? Why should Gerald have loved her best?”

“Oh, Margaret—Margaret,” sobbed Gerald, “don’t talk like that any more—you are breaking my heart.”

“You did not know Gerald,” she went on, without heeding the agony of the white face bending over her. “To know him was to love him. I had no one else but him—he was my world. When we parted my heart broke——”

Gerald’s very soul was moved with pity for this girl who had loved him with so sweet, so pure, so true a love.

He drew her into his encircling arms, pillowed the fair head on his breast, and, bending his head, kissed the prattling lips, murmuring over and over again:

“My poor little Margaret, my pure, true little love.”

Suddenly he saw the eyes looking so vacantly into his own dilate; and he always said afterward that his kisses on her lips had drawn her senses back to this world.

The next moment Margaret was looking up into his face with the light of reason shining in her own.

“Gerald!” she gasped, quite believing herself to be in a dream, though the arms that clasped her so tightly, refusing to allow her to struggle out of them, were real enough. “Gerald!” she whispered, “where am I—how came I here? I—— Oh, I remember, I—I fainted in the park; but what place is this? Did *you* find me, and bring me here?”

Still holding her close, despite her desperate efforts to free herself from his firm clasp, Gerald explained the affair just as Dr. Briscoe had told it to him, ending by earnestly beseeching her to tell him why she had left the farm without leaving one line behind her by which Aurelia and herself could be traced.

“I left Aurelia *there*—she is over at the village. I—I did not think you would care what became of me,” Margaret faltered, hiding her face in her trembling hands.

“Aurelia is not at the village,” returned Gerald, quickly; and he told her the story of how he had been there—and the people thereabouts had told him that both sisters had disappeared together.

Margaret's distress at hearing this was pitiful to behold.

"She has followed me to New York to find me and— and share my misfortunes, Gerald," she declared, vehemently; "but I—I did not want her to toil too; she was intended for a lady. I meant for her to take the seventy-five dollars I left, and board in the village. I would have found something to do, before it was exhausted, which would have yielded enough to support both of us."

"Patient, noble Margaret," murmured Gerald, huskily.

"There is one thing which must be done, and done at once," he declared; "and that is to search New York over until we find Aurelia. But I hardly think we will have much difficulty in finding her," he added hesitatingly.

And he recounted to Margaret what Dr. Briscoe had told him concerning Randolph Clavering's bride, and ending that he had every reason to believe that it was Aurelia whom Clavering had married.

And, as Margaret listened, the memory of the dark, lovely face in the coach which had flashed so quickly past her recurred to her, and she was forced to coincide in Gerald's belief.

"But it was strange, Gerald," she said, with quivering lips, "that she did not search for me. I told her to write me at the general post-office, and every day I called there, but no letter ever came.

"You will go to her at once, Gerald," she pleaded; "tell her how ill I have been, and how weak I am, and perhaps she will come to me."

Promising to do his best to bring her back with him, if it were possible, Gerald took his leave.

He had not told Margaret yet of his great change of fortune.

He was so pleased to see how much she thought of him still, believing him to be poor. There was great comfort in this thought for him.

Somehow, after the first fierce throb at his heart, the idea of seeking Aurelia in her husband's home to deliver her sister's message did not seem quite so bitter a task to accomplish.

He had told himself that he would learn to forget her, to meet her, now that she was another's, with a calm face, even though his heart tortured him.

In this frame of mind, Gerald bent his steps toward the Clavering mansion.

In answer to his summons a servant admitted him; he was shown into the drawing-room, and the man who took up his card returned with the message that Mrs. Clavering would see him very shortly.

It seemed an age to Gerald, sitting in that sumptuous room waiting for her, and how many thoughts rushed across his mind, as his eyes wandered impatiently about the apartment.

How often in the days gone by had he pictured what his meeting with Aurelia would be like. How he would watch for her coming with his very soul in his eager eyes. How he would spring forward to greet her, clasp her madly to his heart as though death itself should never part them again, and kiss the beautiful face, the lovely lips and laughing eyes of her who was, in the near, sweet future, to be all his own.

He had lived over this scene in fancy so many times, and *now*, how different from his day-dreams was the bitter reality? But he must nerve himself to meet her calmly.

Why should his heart throb at the glance of another man's wife's bright eyes, or the clasp of her hand?

Gerald arose from his chair, and with knitted brows paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

The swish of silken skirts in the corridor outside warned him very soon, however, that Randolph Clavering's wife would, within that moment, make her appearance, and in spite of his resolution, his heart throbbed madly in his breast.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WHAT IF HE WERE TO MARRY MARGARET?

THAT moment of time seemed the length of eternity to Gerald Romaine.

The door opened, and he saw a tall, slim figure in pale-rose silk standing before him. His eyes were dazed, as

by a strong and sudden flood of light—he could not see clearly—the gorgeous room and the tall, slim figure seemed to whirl around him.

“You wished to see me, Mr. Romaine?” said a sweet, low voice; and the sound of it recalled Gerald’s scattered senses. It was not the voice of Aurelia.

The mist cleared from before his eyes, and he saw that it was not Aurelia’s entrancing face on which he gazed.

“You wished to see me, Mr. Romaine?” she repeated gently.

“There is evidently a mistake, madam,” said Gerald, flushing with painful embarrassment. “In Mrs. Randolph Clavering I—I expected to see quite another person, one—one—whom I had know,” he stammered.

“I think I understand,” she replied quickly; “you—expected to see Miss Aurelia Lancaster.”

Gerald bowed. Then they both laughed, realizing the ludicrous side of the affair—for the confusion was mutual.

“I can direct you where to find Miss Lancaster, however,” said young Mrs. Clavering at length. “She is at present visiting the Hardings, on Lexington Avenue, I believe.”

“Indeed!” said Gerald, surprisedly. “Why, I know Mr. Harding well.”

When Gerald took his leave, he took a cab at the corner of the street and drove directly to Lawyer Harding’s office.

The lawyer was delighted to meet him. Only that day he had been thinking of Gerald Romaine, and had been pondering over the advisability of inviting the young millionaire to call upon him, with a view to introducing Romaine to his pretty daughter. He was therefore more than pleased to see the object of his thoughts step into his office.

“I have but a moment to stay,” said Gerald, accepting the proffered seat the lawyer placed for him. “I called to see if I have been rightly informed in regard to a young lady who is visiting at your house, I believe; will you kindly inform me if it is Miss Aurelia Lancaster?”

“No, Aurelia Lancaster is dead,” returned Lawyer Harding. “The young lady who is stopping with us is

Margaret Lancaster, her sister. As the young girls lived in your family, surely, you, of all other men, ought to be conversant with the fact that Aurelia has been dead for years."

Gerald looked at him in blank amazement.

"There is evidently an error somewhere," he said. "Aurelia was not dead up to a few weeks ago. I have this from her sister Margaret's lips."

"We are evidently talking at cross-purposes, like the two knights on either side of the gold and silver shield. The best way to get at the root of this affair, is to tell you how I made the acquaintance of the lady who is stopping at my house," returned Lawyer Harding.

Thereupon he proceeded to give Gerald a complete and minute *resume* of the visit of Dr. Thorpe to his office; the will he had drawn up for him in favor of Margaret Lancaster, and of the doctor's sudden death subsequently; and how he had journeyed to Romaine farm himself to see the young girl and acquaint her with the strange trick fate had played upon her; and how startled he had been by her dark, glorious beauty when he had first looked into her face. He could understand then the old doctor's mad infatuation for Margaret Lancaster.

He had told her of the great amount of money bequeathed to Margaret Lancaster, and she had shown him conclusive proofs that she was the Margaret he sought. She had told him, too, the full and complete history of her life, and had mentioned that she once had a sister named Aurelia, but that she was now dead.

Like one turned to stone, Gerald Romaine listened. As the lawyer proceeded, sentence after sentence, with his story, he understood the whole affair. It was as plain as day before him. Soon after Margaret had departed the lawyer had come and explained his errand, and with her great, intense craving for wealth, Aurelia had not been able to withstand the temptation of passing herself off for Margaret and claiming her inheritance.

He was too dumfounded by this revelation to even think clearly or to follow further the lawyer's remarks. He could not find it in his heart to reveal the truth to the lawyer on account of the horrible *expose* that would follow, ending in the bitter disgrace of the woman he

had once loved better than his very life. No, no, he could never do that. He told himself that he must have time to think his way clearly out of the entangling labyrinth in which he found himself. He recollected himself with an effort. The lawyer was saying:

“Shall I tell Miss Lancaster you will call?”

Gerald laid his hand earnestly on the other's arm.

“No, not yet,” he said, incoherently. “I—— Will you do me the great favor of not mentioning to Miss Lancaster that you have seen me?”

“Certainly, if you wish it,” returned Mr. Harding, wondering in his own mind what had caused the young man to change his mind so abruptly on hearing that the girl was now an heiress.

When Gerald Romaine left the lawyer's presence and walked out to where his coach was standing, he felt very much dazed—like a man under the influence of strong wine.

How should he break the news of Aurelia's treachery to Margaret? he asked himself.

“Where to now, sir?” asked the coach-driver, as he re-entered the vehicle.

“Once or twice through the park, then to —— Hospital,” returned Gerald.

He must have time to think clearly what course to pursue.

This last escapade of Aurelia's showed him her character in a light in which he had never seen it before. He never censured her because her heart had gone out to another lover, even though at the time she was betrothed to himself, for we have no power over the human heart; love is ordered by a divine power and goes where it is sent, despite all obstacles. No, he could not blame her for that, but a complete revulsion of feeling swept over his heart when he pictured to himself the heartlessness, the treachery, the cruelty of a girl who could usurp another's place, take the bread, as it were, out of another's mouth, and, like the vampire, feed upon the life-blood of her sister—poor, patient, gentle Margaret.

In that moment even his respect for Aurelia died out of his heart. While Margaret had been sitting in the park suffering the pangs of hunger—ay, of hunger—Au-

relia had been rolling in the wealth so treacherously acquired. How was he to tell Margaret that? Why, it would break her heart.

Suddenly, riding through the cool, green park, an idea came to him that made his heart throb quickly, and his fair, handsome face flush.

A way occurred to him to meet the difficulty nicely. Why not marry Margaret, if she would overlook the past and have him? He had enough for both. Let Aurelia keep the money which she had bartered her honor to gain.

Sitting there, he pictured to himself what life with Margaret would be like—calm, uneventful, peaceful—no great height of bliss—no great depths of disappointment. Men would never look upon him with desperate envy because of the peerless wife he had won; but on the other hand he would never know the pangs of jealousy, the haunting doubts that had cursed many another man's life who had cast all his life-hopes on a beautiful woman's love.

He could take Margaret into the society of the most fascinating men in the world, and yet feel safe in Margaret's fidelity. His honor would be dear to her as life itself. No man, save himself, could ever dare to hold her hands and look love to her out of his eyes. Home to her would be a sacred shrine.

She would watch and wait, when evening fell, for his coming. If all the world of wives went wrong, Margaret, his sweet wife, would be true. And Gerald Romaine was man of the world enough now to know the priceless value of a woman's constancy.

By the time the coach stopped at the hospital, Gerald had fully made up his mind as to the course he should pursue.

As he ran lightly up the broad, marble steps, he thought of the lines that had haunted him ever since he had read them, and which seems to have almost been written for him:

“ 'Tis sweet to feel in this sad world of change,
Where selfishness and pride so much abound,
That there is one, however wide we range,
To greet us lovingly when home is found—

One whom we know will faithful be till death,
Whose heart-throbs play in concert with our own,
Whose love will bless us till our latest breath,
To whose pure bosom falseness is unknown.

“The famished wretch who droops his head with shame,
May be relieved by any passer-by;
The ardent youth who hungers after fame,
Has always hope of feasting presently.
But, oh, to feel that we are all alone,
That love’s sweet cup has vapor’d to the lees,
That there is no heart we can call our own—
This is a hunger nothing can appease.

“To wander on without a ray of hope,
To find no respite even in our sleep,
Life’s sun extinguished, in the dark to grope,
And hopeless through this world to creep;
No balm for us, no medicine can cure—
The ailing is beyond the reach of art—
All other hunger strong men may endure,
Except the weary, dreary hunger of the heart.”

“Margaret will wonder that I have returned to her so soon,” he thought, with a grave smile lighting up his fair, handsome face, “and how amazed she will be when she learns my errand.”

What if the bitter past lay like a dark chasm between them, which all his earnest pleading could not bridge over? What if Margaret refused to trust him a second time with the love of her gentle heart?

Surely he had no right to expect anything from her hands.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MARGARET LOVED HIM FOR HIMSELF—NOT HIS WEALTH.

As Gerald had expected, Margaret was quite surprised at seeing him so soon again.

She held out her thin, little white hands to him with an eager light in her eyes.

“You have news for me of Aurelia,” she said, earnestly; “tell me, Gerald, is it not so?”

He shook his head.

“You did not expect it so soon?” he asked, lightly—evasively.

Her countenance fell, and she looked at him wistfully.

“No; I came back to talk to you of yourself, Ma

garet," he said, huskily, seating himself beside the couch—taking her hands and stroking them gently.

"Then the doctor has told you all, Gerald?" she whispered.

"He has told me—nothing," returned Gerald. "Why, what is there to tell, Margaret?"

"He was here just a little while after you left," she returned, slowly. "Two other doctors were with him; they held a consultation about me, and—I—heard them say it would be almost a miracle—if I—I—lived.

"Are you crying, Gerald?" she asked, in wonder, as he buried his face in his hands, and his strong frame shook with emotion.

"You must live, darling," he whispered; "you shall not die; I could not lose you."

She smiled such a weak, pitiful smile up into the face he had bent over her.

"You are sorry for me, Gerald," she whispered, "but, indeed, you must not be; I am not sorry to go; only—only—one fear comes to me; who will there be to look after Aurelia when—when I am gone?"

A hard, bitter smile crept round his lips. Poor, trusting Margaret! if she but knew of Aurelia's treachery; but he could not tell her of it—no, not now.

"You shall not die, Margaret," he cried, vehemently; "you shall live—for my sake. Live to be what you should have been long ago, in that past which was ruthlessly lost—be my wife, sweet Margaret."

She looked at him with dilated eyes, and shrunk from him, and this action caused him the keenest pain.

"Margaret," he cried, "why do you shrink from me? Have you learned to despise me for my mad folly in that past? Have you lost faith in me utterly?"

"You pity me, Gerald," she murmured, gently. "and you are deceiving yourself into believing that it is love. No, no, it could not be; you could never love a poor, plain girl like me; you feel sorry for me because my life is going out so soon."

"I *do* love you, Margaret," he declared, vehemently, "and I want you to let me prove it to you. In the future my love shall never waver as it did in that unhappy past."

“You could not love me, for your heart is Aurelia’s,” she sobbed, faintly.

“Was Aurelia’s,” he corrected, gently, “but *now* it is all yours, Margaret. Your sister is now nothing to me—nothing. Oh, Margaret, trust me once again with your priceless love, and see how I shall prize it.”

“We could never be anything to each other but friends, Gerald,” she said, wistfully; “we were never intended for each other. I—I did not know that at first; I saw it all afterward. I—I am too plain to hold your love now, so what would it be when I would be plainer still—when age wrinkled my face and whitened my hair!”

“You would still be my loving, faithful Margaret—my guiding star,” he murmured.

“No,” she persisted, “we are not suited to each other, Gerald. The woman you love must be very clever and beautiful—I am neither. Some day you will be very famous, Gerald, for I have great faith in your patents; you will win fame and riches, and you will move in the great world of fashion, where you will meet great men and noble ladies—you—you would feel ashamed—yes, ashamed, Gerald, of me.”

“What if I was never to make anything out of my patents, Margaret?” he whispered—“if I were destined to be poor for evermore—what then?”

He could feel the slender hands he held tremble in his grasp; and a bright wave of color surged over the paleness of her face, leaving it, as it receded, paler than ever.

“Will you answer me, Margaret?” he urged. “If you believed that I would always be poor, and could be made to believe that I would love you with so faithful and true a love that it would be incapable of swerving again—would you then trust yourself to my keeping?”

“Why discuss it, Gerald, when you know my time here is so short?” she murmured.

“But I must have my answer, Margaret,” he said, firmly, looking eagerly into her eyes, and drawing the weak, resisting form nearer still to him.

“Ah, Margaret! you love me still,” he whispered: “you have always loved me, and will love me until the day you die. Let me make you happy, dear. Oh, Mar-

garet, say that you will marry me when you are strong enough to leave this place! Margaret, love, only trust me once again. Forget, like the angel that you are, that I once threw ruthlessly aside the great pearl of your love. Give it once again into my keeping, and as I deal with you, so may Heaven deal with me!"

Can any one wonder what gentle Margaret's answer was, loving him with a love next to that she gave her God?

Her whole soul yearned for him. It seemed to her Heaven was stretching down to earth to her.

"Oh, Gerald, I do not deserve to be so happy!" she sobbed.

"Then your answer is yes, is it not, Margy, dear?" he whispered.

"Yes, Gerald," she said, shyly, and he bent and kissed the pale lips for the second time as the seal of their betrothal.

Dr. Briscoe scarcely recognized his patient, there was such a change in her when he beheld her an hour later; but he knew what had caused it when he saw her in-folded in Gerald Romaine's arms with her fair head pillowed on his breast.

From that day Margaret's recovery was as speedy as Gerald could hope for.

There was only one thing to mar her happiness and weigh heavily on her mind, and that was, her solicitude over Aurelia, and the word Gerald brought her from day to day that he had not been successful as yet in finding her sister.

"But the seventy-five dollars I left her will soon be exhausted, Gerald," she would sob pitifully; "and then, oh, Heaven pity her, what will Aurelia do then, Gerald? She has been reared so daintily, you know. She cannot work. What will she do?"

"Do not waste your pity on so worthless an object," were the words on Gerald's lips a score of times, but he dared not utter them; he only said: "The seventy-five dollars will not melt as rapidly as you anticipate, Margaret, dear. I promise you I shall be sure to find her before it is exhausted, and she is reduced to want. Trust me in that, darling, as you do in everything else."

“I—I almost feel that it is sinful to be so happy in your love, Gerald,” Margaret said one day, “while Aurelia’s whereabouts is unknown to us. Only Heaven can tell the great agony of mind she may be enduring in searching for me and not being able to find me. How strange, Gerald, that we did not think about inserting a personal in all the leading papers acquainting her as to where I am. It is strange you did not think of that, and you so clever.”

Gerald smiled and thanked her after the fashion that lovers like best for so pretty a compliment.

One day, when he called to see Margaret, he found her with a very anxious face.

“Gerald,” she said, looking up with wistful tenderness into his face, “you come here to see me every day, don’t you, dear, and—and you stay for hours.”

“As an engaged lover, who is very soon to claim his wife now, has a right to do,” he declared, laughing.

“Of course I—I love to see you, but, Gerald, can you afford to lose so much time from your work?” she asked earnestly. “You—you must find it very hard making enough to meet the expenses of your board, dear, from week to week, don’t you? Tell me how you manage?”

Gerald Romaine threw back his fair, handsome head and laughed aloud, picturing to himself how Margaret would stare if he should tell her that all those hard, grinding days of poverty were over now, that he was a millionaire many times over, even though he was dressed now quite as plainly as when he was Gerald Romaine, the farmer’s son.

Wouldn’t simple Margaret be amazed at the fine lady he intended to make of her!

It was truly like the pretty romance of the Lord of Burleigh enacted over again.

But wealth and grandeur would not spoil Margaret, nor should she droop and die. And how sweet the thought, Margaret loved him for himself, not his wealth.

CHAPTER XLV.

PLEDGED TO EACH OTHER.

AURELIA had made up her mind to see Gerald Romaine the very day after the reception, but she soon found that it was not so easy locating a person in the great metropolis.

She sent messages to all the hotels; but the word was brought back from all that "Mr. Romaine was not stopping with them."

He must be with friends, Aurelia told herself impatiently, and it was quite impossible to determine his whereabouts.

She heard nothing but praises of Gerald on every lip, and, in listening to the glowing accounts of his fabulous wealth, her regard for her former lover awakened into new life.

It was a keen delight to her to know that this young man, whom the whole world of women wanted, loved only her; that they had not the least possible chance of winning him.

Gerald had been pointed out to Alice Harding by one of her girl friends, as they were riding down the avenue one day, and the girl could never forget the frank, smiling blue eyes that had met hers for an instant so indifferently, then glanced carelessly past her.

"I have seen Mr. Romaine!" she cried, rushing into Aurelia's room that night. "Oh, isn't he splendid, though! It is a wonder, Miss Lancaster, that, living beneath the same roof, you never fell in love with him!"

Aurelia threw back her curly head with a forced laugh.

"I liked Gerald very much," she answered; "and he—well, he idolized me so much that it was the talk of all the country round. We were engaged, you know, at one time."

Miss Harding opened her eyes very wide, and Aurelia saw her flush uneasily.

"Then you are not engaged now?" she asked, anxiously.

"No, not now," returned Aurelia, lightly. "And

sometimes when I get to thinking the matter over, I am sorry that I broke off with him—he was so fond of me!”

“It is a wonder, then, that he does not call upon you—for the sake of old times,” returned Miss Harding, with just the slightest suspicion of malice in her smooth voice.

“I told him never to come near me unless I sent for him,” said Aurelia—the quick-witted—uttering the little fib as nonchalantly as possible.

It was too keen a cut to her pride to have Alice Harding think that he would be in the same city and was indifferent about seeing her. She determined to have her think that there was an excellent reason for his not doing so.

“If you threw such a handsome young man as Mr. Romaine over, you are very hard to please, that is certain, Miss Lancaster!” declared Alice, with a toss of her head, which said almost as plainly as words that she rather doubted that statement, however.

“If I knew where he was stopping I would send him a line, and you would see how quickly he would respond,” declared Aurelia, flouncing out of the room, and closing the door after her with a bang.

She renewed her efforts to find Gerald that afternoon, but to no purpose.

There was not a trace to be found of him in all New York; and thus, day after day winged its swift flight by, and the days lengthened into weeks.

Aurelia’s father was impatient to set sail for England, but she always succeeded in putting him off from week to week, with the excuse that she was not quite ready. Her real reason was that she would not leave Gerald Romaine behind her.

As for Gerald, those days passed pleasantly enough with him; as Aurelia had concluded, he was indeed stopping with friends.

A Mrs. Denham, the wife of one of the superintendents of his mines, resided on Lexington Avenue, and to her Gerald went straightway after he had left Margaret on the day he asked her to be his wife, and, narrating that romantic portion of his story concerning Margaret to her, begged her to tell him where he should take her,

when she was able to leave the hospital, until they were ready to be married.

“Bring her to me, my dear Mr. Romaine,” said the motherly old lady, “and you shall stop with me, too; this old house is roomy enough for a whole party of young people; bring your sweetheart to me, by all means.”

It was certainly a whim of Gerald’s, but he begged Mrs. Denham not to tell Margaret just yet how kind fortune had been to him, and she laughingly consented.

That very afternoon he took her down to see Margaret. Naturally shy with strangers, this grand old lady, with the proud face, dressed in silk, and whose fair old wrinkled hands shone with gems, quite overawed the timid girl, but, with the tact habitual with good breeding, Mrs. Denham soon succeeded in putting her quite at her ease.

“As Mr. Romaine’s friend and yours, I have determined that the happy event shall take place at my house, my dear,” she declared, taking Margaret’s hands in hers and looking down into the girl’s blushing, bashful face. “Now please do not thwart me in this plan; and I have begged Mr. Romaine to use his influence with you to make my home your own until your marriage.”

Her great kindness and generosity and apparent interest in her quite overpowered and bewildered Margaret.

“Oh, madam, you are too good to me!” she faltered. “I cannot find words in which to sufficiently thank you. Gerald and I could never repay you for your goodness—only with the deepest and most sincere gratitude.”

“Don’t mention it, my dear,” said the lady reddening, thinking to herself how much she and her husband were indebted to Gerald Romaine for his generosity to them.

Thus it came about that, as soon as Margaret was able to be removed, she was taken to Mrs. Denham’s home. Its grandeur quite overawed the girl, used only to the simplest surroundings; it seemed almost a magnificent palace to her unsophisticated eyes; but as the days glided by there was one other thing besides being unable to find Aurelia that sorely perplexed Margaret, and that was to understand why Gerald should spend so much time in apparent idleness.

Every morning he sent her a fine bouquet of roses, which she found beside her plate, and when she found that they were from a florist, and were as much as two dollars for a single dozen, her alarm grew. Gerald must be spending all the money he received from the patent which he sold, for flowers.

Margaret had been brought up prudently, with the maxim always before her that "willful waste makes woful want," and accordingly she was much troubled at this lavish expenditure of his hard earned dollars on Gerald's part, and she made up her mind that she must speak to him again about it.

The matter culminated in a very ludicrous manner, and came about in this way:

One morning, as they were leaving the breakfast-table, Gerald asked Margaret to come into the library with him, saying he had something for her, and she followed him there at once.

Seating her in one of the large leather arm-chairs, Gerald drew up a hassock beside her and flung himself down upon it at her feet.

"Kiss me first, my darling," said Gerald, "then I will tell you what I have for you. Come, now, do not say that you are not like the rest of your charming sex—just dying of curiosity to know what it is," he said, laughing.

Very timidly Margaret complied, struggling out of his arms when he would have held her closely.

"Well," said Gerald, with an air of resignation, "I hope you will think it worth another kiss after you have seen it."

And as he spoke, he drew from his vest-pocket a tiny parcel which he proceeded to unwrap, disclosing at length a bright crimson velvet little case, and touching a spring, the lid flew back, disclosing to Margaret's astonished, delighted eyes the loveliest ring she had ever beheld—a hoop of gold, with a large, white, glistening stone, that looked like an imprisoned dew-drop, imbedded in it, lying upon a white velvet bed.

Margaret fairly caught her breath with rapture, clasping her hands together and looking at it with her whole soul in her eyes.

“Do you like it, Margy dear?” asked Gerald, well pleased.

“I have never seen anything one-half so beautiful in all of my life,” she exclaimed, rapturously; and, woman-like, she was too absorbed in its beauty just then to think about the cost.

“Is it worth another kiss?” asked Gerald, audaciously; and he took it before Margaret had time to reply.

“There could be no engagement without a ring, Margy,” he declared, “so I had this made for you. Do you see the inscription inside?”

And holding it up to the light, she saw the words engraved in it:

“To my sweet love, Margaret—From Gerald.”

“You will prize it for its beauty, I know, dear,” said Gerald, placing it on her white hand.

Then, for the first time in his life, Gerald saw gentle Margaret deeply agitated.

With a sudden impulse she threw her arms about his neck—it was the first caress she voluntarily gave him, and he saw that her sweet face was wet with tears.

“Gerald, dear,” she sobbed, “it is not its great beauty for which I shall love it—if it had been a gutta-percha ring I should have prized it just as much, Gerald, because it is *your gift*, and it is the outward token that we are pledged each to the other.

CHAPTER XLVI.

“YOUR ANSWER HOLDS LIFE OR DEATH FOR ME.”

GERALD ROMAINE could not help being touched by such beautiful and faithful devotion to himself, and he wondered vaguely, as he sat there at her feet, clasping her little hands, how his love had ever happened to stray from her to fickle, flighty Aurelia, who thought as little of crushing the hearts of men as she thought of walking over the wild flowers and crushing them with her dainty heels. *That* love dream had been like the torrid heat of a summer noonday—*this* was the quiet calm of a setting October sunlight; golden, tranquil.

When Margaret left Gerald's presence, she hurried

straightway to the drawing-room where she knew that she would find Mrs. Denham—to show her lover's pretty gift.

“What a beauty, Margaret, my dear!” she exclaimed, enthusiastically; “it is the most beautiful diamond that I have ever seen—it is indeed!”

“A diamond!” cried Margaret agast. “Why, Mrs. Denham, you are greatly mistaken; it is not a diamond ring. I have always heard that they cost great sums of money. Gerald could not——”

“Why, Margaret!” interrupted Mrs. Denham, eagerly, forgetting for the moment her promise to Gerald in her excitement, “I assure you it is a diamond, and a most magnificent one. I am sure it did not cost less than a thousand dollars—possibly twice that sum.”

Margaret's face had grown white as death.

“Are you sure it is a diamond ring, and costly, Mrs. Denham?” she asked, hoarsely.

“Certainly, my dear. Don't you suppose I know a good diamond when I see it?”

Margaret clung to the back of the nearest chair for support.

“Gerald must take the ring back to where he bought it. There is some terrible mistake, somewhere, Mrs. Denham,” she sobbed, piteously.

With that the lady recollected herself.

“Let me give you a word of advice, my dear Margaret,” she said, anxiously, “and that is, don't say anything to Mr. Romaine about it. You've got your pretty ring—just keep it.”

“No,” responded Margaret, firmly. “I could never do that. Gerald is a poor man. How could he have paid as much as a thousand dollars, or even half that sum, for a ring? I know there is some great mistake. Why, Gerald could not have afforded one that cost over five dollars, Mrs. Denham,” she added gravely.

The idea was so ludicrous that for once in her life the stately matron lost her dignity, laughing so heartily that Margaret looked at her in wonder.

“You will certainly be the death of me, Miss Lancaster,” she declared, between her explosions of laughter. “I have never seen a young lady like you. Any other girl would never think of bothering her brain worrying

how much a ring cost or where her lover got the money to pay for it, or whether he could afford it or not. I repeat, you are a most extraordinary girl. Your being brought up in the country accounts for your quaint notions. I am afraid, when you marry Mr. Romaine and settle down in the city to live, you will change those pretty ideas. You will want your diamonds larger than your neighbor's; you will want necklaces that an empress might envy, and rings and brooches that will be the talk of the country."

"You forget that I am going to marry a man who would be unable to gratify any such longings, even if I were foolish enough to have them," returned Margaret. "Even if we should prosper," she went on, thoughtfully, "I would never consent to Gerald investing in a senseless little ring enough money to buy a thrifty farm. Why, it would burn my finger if I did."

And, with this remark, Margaret hurriedly quitted the drawing-room and walked swiftly to the library.

Gerald was still there, writing letters.

She went up to him swiftly, and laid her hand—the little hand on which the beautiful ring shone—gently but firmly on his arm.

He looked up at her with a smile, but the smile faded from his handsome, good-humored face when he saw the tears in her blue eyes.

"What is the matter, Margaret?" he cried, anxiously, laying down his pen, and clasping the little hand eagerly in both of his.

"I—I want to talk to you, Gerald," she faltered, "but I—do not know how to speak."

"My dear Margaret," he said, "I am glad that you come to me, as you now do, with your little troubles or grievances—there must always be perfect confidence between us, my dear."

"That is just what I want to talk about, Gerald," she replied, with wistful tremulousness. "Is there perfect confidence between us, do you think? Oh, Gerald, are you *sure* of that?"

"I would not willingly deceive you in any way, my dear—knowingly," he declared, the drift of her thoughts never once occurring to him at that moment.

"Gerald," she murmured faintly, speaking with a

great effort, as though her voice choked her, "when a man is very poor—and he buys costly things, where does he get the money to do it with, do you suppose?"

Even then Gerald Romaine, being so honorable in thought, word and deed—having no guilty conscience to accuse him, never dreamed that she was referring in any way to himself, and he answered lightly:

"A good many of them gamble, most likely. Men with expensive habits, who have not the money to gratify them, usually get it by hook or by crook—being none too particular as to how they make it."

Margaret slowly drew her diamond ring from her finger, and laid it down on the paper before him.

"Gerald," she said, calmly, keeping back her tears by a superhuman effort, "if the money that purchased this ring was gained by you dishonestly, I would sooner die than wear it. If you have become a—a gambler I—will never marry you. I love you dearer than my life—but I would rather give you up than promise before the altar the cruel falsehood that I would love and honor you—if you took so much as a penny from any man dishonestly."

She had expected to see him flush burning red, then turn deadly pale, and end by confessing the whole truth to her, and the way in which he sat back in his chair, his gay laugh echoing and re-echoing through the room, quite bewildered her.

"It is not a matter to make merry over, Gerald," she sobbed. "Your—your—answer holds life or death for me."

"Then it will be life, my good girl," he said, drawing her forcibly toward him. "I see there will be no peace until I tell you the whole truth—make a clean breast of the whole affair. I wanted to have a surprise for you on the day I am to claim you for my bride, but I think, even though you hear the truth, you will still love me, and even in your timidity, you will not shrink from me, for I will be the same Gerald five minutes from now, after telling you, that I am now; say to yourself now, as you must say to yourself *then*, 'that Gerald is your true and devoted lover, and that your affection must be just the same for your husband that is to be, as it was before you heard the story.' Do you promise this?"

“Yes,” returned Margaret, “I promise, but I could not believe that you would ask me to do this if you had ever gambled.”

Drawing her closer to him still, Gerald poured into her astonished ears the story of his great change of fortune—of the almost fabulous wealth that had been showered upon him from every side, and what her position in the world would be when she became his dear wife, and shared his honors and great wealth with him.

But when he had finished his story, Margaret spoke no word.

She had listened like one turned to stone, her face as pallid and cold as marble.

“Do you not rejoice at our good fortune, sweet?” he cried enthusiastically. “Oh, Margaret, how silent you are. Surely you are glad? It is not in human nature to be otherwise, my darling.”

She laid her head on his arm, and wept so bitterly, he was amazed.

How oddly she took the joyful intelligence!

“Will you tell me what you think about it, Margy?” he said tenderly, stroking the fair, tumbled hair back from her tear-stained face.

“This is what I think, Gerald,” she sobbed:

““You walk the sunny side of fate,
The wise world smiles and calls you great,
The golden fruitage of success
Drops at your feet in plenteousness;
And you have blessings manifold;
Renown and power and friends and gold;
They build a wall between us twain
That may not be thrown down again,
Alas, for I the long time through,
Have loved you better than you knew.””

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE STORY OF A BLIGHTED LIFE.

“MARGARET,” said her lover, deeply pained by her words, “it seems almost incredible to me to see you take this matter as you do; I had supposed your joy would be great—it is not like my noble Margaret to regret—my success.”

She looked up at him though her tears.

"It is not your success I regret, Gerald," she answered, in a choking voice, "but the thought which comes of it:

"It builds a wall between us twain
Which may not be torn down again."

"It is not like you, Margaret, to take such a cruel view of the case," Gerald persisted. "What is mine, will be yours, dear. You must look at it in that light. Think how happy I can make you—being able to gratify every wish of your heart. Love, without wealth, is very good—but with wealth, it is the greatest happiness the earth holds. I am no mercenary, my darling, I speak from experience which comes from a thorough and practical knowledge of the world, and the manifold advantages of all powerful gold. Dry your tears, Margy; look up, and smile again. You have loved me through poverty, and now I plead for the continuance of the same affection, despite the wealth that has come to me."

Margaret looked up and smiled, to please him; but for all that, her heart was very heavy.

Long after Gerald left the library, Margaret still sat motionless, with her face buried in her hands.

"For the second time in life I had just begun to be happy, and—once again is the cup of happiness to be dashed from my famished lips," she sobbed, piteously. "I trusted to Gerald's love once before, and I found it so weak."

And sitting there, the anguished words a woman had once uttered came with startling clearness back to her. She could almost hear that voice sobbing again:

"Oh, Miss Lancaster, the wealth that has come to my husband, brought with it a curse to me, for it built a wall between us, and lost me my husband's love."

Margaret thought of the tragic story this lady had poured into her ears.

She lived in the little village that lay over the hill from Romaine Farm, and the village folk spoke of her as the proud, cold lady who lived in the great stone house on the hill—who never smiled. For twenty years or more she had rarely passed the precinct of her own gateway.

Once, years before, one of the good old ministers of the village called upon the lady. What his reception was, what he saw or heard behind those closed doors, he would never reveal; his visit was but of a few short moments' duration; but from that hour the name of the lady who lived in the stone house on the hill never crossed his lips.

One day, when Margaret was a little child, and was culling wild roses by the roadside, she was startled by a step, and glancing around she saw a woman, robed in shimmering silk, standing motionless in the path, watching her intently.

Margaret, child though she was, recognized in the woman—by the description John Romaine had given the family of her—the occupant of the stone house on the hill.

“No doubt she wants some of these pretty flowers I have just gathered,” thought the child, remembering what the villagers said about no flowers ever growing in that waste of land that surrounded the stone house—they had been choked out, long years before, by the weeds.

“Will you please have these flowers, ma'am?” said the child Margaret, timidly.

The woman drew back, her face paling visibly.

“Child! what tempted you to offer me those roses?” she asked, adding harshly in the next breath, “Did you expect I would put a gold piece into your hand for them?”

“Oh, no, ma'am; indeed not,” Margaret had answered, in deep distress. “I did not want money for them; I would not have taken any.”

“You meant to give them to me?” she asked, incredulously, her face relenting from its hard, habitual expression for a moment.

“Yes,” murmured Margaret.

“What impulse led you to do it, child?” asked the woman.

“Because I wanted to please you,” returned Margaret, simply.

“Heaven bless your sweet face, child,” she said, taking the roses, and kissing the little hand that had held them. “May Heaven in its mercy spare you from ever

knowing a fate like mine. What is your name, and where do you live?"

"My name is Margaret Lancaster, and I live at Romaine Farm," the child had made answer.

Years passed on, and Margaret quite forgot the little episode, but it was called forcibly back to her mind by a strange incident.

It was at the time when her heart was so heavy over the loss of Gerald Romaine; and one night she had wandered down the woodland path, and when far away from the house, and where she thought no human ear could hear her, she had flung herself down under the trees in the long grass, sobbing as though her heart would break—and such bitter tears, that the angels up in heaven must have grieved for her.

Suddenly a hand was laid upon her shoulder, and glancing up, Margaret saw a woman standing in the moonlight before her.

One glance, and she recognized—although she had not seen her for long years—the lady who lived in the stone house on the hill.

The recognition was mutual.

The woman drew back with a little cry, as she saw the face raised to her own.

"Margaret Lancaster—the child who gave me the flowers years ago—a woman now, inheriting a woman's heritage of sorrow! Will you tell me your grief, Margaret? You will feel better for unburdening your sorrow to some one."

The voice was so kind that Margaret obeyed. And still sobbing as though her heart would break, told her all.

She listened, until the girl had come to the end of her story, without a word of comment.

"Poor Margaret," she sighed, smoothing back the girl's fair hair. "Your grief is bitter, you think, but, oh, child, the loss of a lover is as nothing compared to what your bitter woe would be if it was a husband's love you had lost. No sorrow the wide world holds could equal that. Why, I laugh at a girl's heartaches at the loss of a lover. That is a grief that soon mends, they find, e'en though they love deeply. Let me tell you my

story, and you will see that there are griefs far more cruel than yours, and which only the grave can hide.

“I have wealth, child—wealth that would purchase a king’s ransom. I have every luxury that money can buy, and yet before you you see a woman who is the unhappiest, I believe, that ever the world held.

“When I was young, like you, Margaret Lancaster, the world was fair enough. I was a miller’s daughter, and I sang among the corn, flowers, or by the brook side, as happy as the day was long.

“I married the young village lawyer, and, oh, child, for a time the world was a golden dream; we were poor, but we loved each other so well, that we never minded that—we had each other. We had a little cottage, and I cooked the meals; and, oh, how Willie loved me then. Suddenly a relative died from afar over the seas and made my Willie his heir. The lawyers sent for Willie and he had to go. Oh, how I clung to him with kisses and tears, begging him to come back to me soon.

“He went, and the sun seemed to darken as I watched him go down the path, and the world to grow chill. I did not understand it then. I knew but too well what it meant after. It was the premonition of the evil that was to come that cast its dark shadow on before. My Willie stayed in that far-off England three long and weary years; at first his letters came long and regular; then by degrees they grew shorter and came at longer intervals; but I would not think anything of that, save that my Willie was too busy to write.

“One day when I was sitting sewing, a shadow crossed the sunshine of the window. I stepped to the door and flung it open; a handsome man, proud and cold, stood on the threshold, but even despite the fineness of his attire I knew him—it was my Willie who had come back to me. I sprung to meet him with a great, glad cry, but his arms did not fold me to his heart—they pushed me from him—and the lips that brushed my forehead were as cold as ice. I drew back and looked at him with a heart as bitter as death. I felt that my Willie who had loved me so well had died, and in this haughty stranger’s cold, proud life I had no part. He was a great city gentleman now, the neighbors said, and had come back

for his country wife. It was so, Miss Lancaster, Willie was indeed a gentleman then.

“I went with him to the elegant mansion in New York that he had purchased, but, oh, life was cruel there. Willie was ashamed to show the fine friends who called upon him—his country wife. We had bitter quarrels, for my pride was hurt to the quick, and one day Willie cried out that he wished he had never married me—that he had gold a king might envy him in possessing—but it was as dross to him because he had married a woman beneath him. ‘Never from this hour,’ he cried, ‘will I have one word to say to you. Live beneath the same roof with me, if you must, but from this hour you go your way and I go mine; when we meet it shall be as strangers.’ And through the years that came and went after that he kept his word.

“I pray God in his mercy that no other woman will ever experience the living death those years were to me; to live beneath the same roof with the husband she idolizes and be as far from him as the earth from the stars. There were times when I would have given the whole world to have flung myself on his breast and sobbed out to him—that this life was killing me. I would have given my life to have had him clasp my hands and talk to me in the old way. He died surrounded by haughty strangers, and without one word to me. Since then I have shut myself up in the stone house on the hill, in the lonely village yonder, praying for death that is long in coming. The wealth that came to my husband was my curse, Miss Lancaster. If wealth had not come between us, his love would have been mine until the day he died.”

“Heaven help me,” thought Margaret, as she reviewed that pitiful story in her own mind. “Will that be the way with Gerald and me? I dare not think of the future.”

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A MEMORY OF THE PAST.

MR. LANCASTER—or, rather, Count Lorenzo, as he preferred to call himself—could not understand why his

daughter should require so much time to prepare for her journey.

He had long since tired of New York, and longed for the bustle of London, or the gayety of Paris, and he vowed at length that he should not remain in this city a day longer than was actually necessary.

With the intention of acquainting Aurelia with this resolve, he went to Lawyer Harding's house one day and called for Miss Lancaster.

"The lady is not at home, sir," replied the servant, who had taken his card.

"Can you tell me when I shall be likely to find her in?" he asked, rather impatiently.

The man shook his head; but the count knew of the golden key which always unlocks a servant's lips, and, as he finished the sentence, he thrust a bank-note in the other's hand.

The man made a low obeisance, and pocketed the money.

"Miss Lancaster has gone out for a ride in Central Park, sir," he said. "It is always very uncertain as to what time she will return. My advice is, if you are so very anxious to see her, station yourself just within the gate nearest Broadway—this side, and you will be sure not to miss her; she always comes that way."

With a haughty nod of thanks for the information, the count turned away.

It was certainly good advice, and the count took it; he sauntered leisurely up Broadway, and took up his station at the place indicated in the park.

There were hundreds of equipages on the drives that sunny afternoon, and hundreds of loiterers in the paths; but the count's eyes never lingered for an instant upon them.

"I do not feel like myself," he muttered; "I cannot tell why. I am not a superstitious man; but, somehow, I cannot shake off the premonition that something unusual is about to happen to me—the very air seems to oppress me; I——"

The sentence was never finished, even in his own thoughts; for, at that moment, a laugh fell upon his ear—a laugh, sweet and musical, that vibrated through every fiber of his being like an electric shock.

He turned quickly, eagerly, and saw two ladies coming down the path toward the gate. One was portly, with silver-white hair and eye-glasses. A parasol hid her companion's face from his view; but he knew that she was young; her form was slender and girlish, and the hand that held the parasol was beautiful and white.

An impulse, which the count was wholly unable to understand, caused him to move to the other side of the gate, where he might catch a glimpse of the girl's face.

One glance, and it seemed to him that every drop of blood in his veins left his body.

He was too startled to clearly understand that he had attracted the attention of the elderly lady, who was regarding him critically.

The ladies were Mrs. Denham and Margaret Lancaster.

"Look, my dear," said Mrs. Denham, nervously, "see how that man by the gate is watching you! I feel actually nervous about passing so near him. Turn your head another way. The rude stare of strangers is the most annoying thing a lady is subjected to in New York."

It was quite true; the count was watching Margaret with his whole soul in his burning eyes, and Margaret seemed to feel the influence of those magnetic eyes to the depths of her heart, for she trembled and turned pale to the lips.

As the count watched her so intently—so breathlessly, memory carried him back long years to a far-off country, and to a dusty traveler wandering under the linden trees, and of the sudden sound of just such a sweet, musical laugh, and how the traveler bent forward to catch a sight of the face of the girl who had awakened his heart to a new thrill of life by her voice.

He had seen a fair face, as sweet as youth and health could make it, with rosy cheeks, tender blue eyes, and white forehead, framed in a mass of fluffy, flaxen hair.

She was crossing the blossoming hop-fields with a companion, and in accordance with the customs of the country, carried a basket of fruit on that pretty, graceful, flaxen head, the poise of which a princess might have been proud of.

The stranger had followed her quite to her home, and

saw that she lived in a small cottage down in the valley, and he found upon inquiring at a neighboring cottage that the girl's name was Margaret, and that she sold fruit in the market-stall in the village twice a week.

It had been the stranger's intention to loiter in the little German village but a day, but the event had happened which changed for all time the course of his existence; he had met for the first time in his life a being who had awakened a throb of love in his heart, and when the summer faded, and the hops were ripe for picking in the fields, he was still there, for he, whom beautiful, high-born beauties had smiled on in vain, had asked Margaret to be his bride, and she had consented.

They were wedded, sweet Margaret, the pretty peasant girl, and the stranger, who was the count himself.

The first tears that had fallen from his hard, cold eyes for long years filled them as memory reverted to that blissful honeymoon that lasted just one brief year, and then his blue-eyed Margaret was cut down like the corn-flowers in the field, suddenly and without warning, by death's cruel scythe, and the frail mite that she placed in his arms looked up at him with Margaret's sweet blue eyes.

But little Margaret had died in her babyhood, as Aurelia had told him, and the thought came to him that she must have looked quite like this fair young girl had she lived.

A longing, strong as the rush of the waters of the mighty ocean, came upon him to hear her speak, if but one word—only one little word.

He tried to call to her—to put one question to her, that she must answer, but words failed him; his lips moved, making no sound.

She drew nearer—nearer. Ah, God in Heaven! how like Margaret's eyes were these blue ones turned so timidly toward him.

He was not accountable for the rash act that followed. The despairing soul of the man rendered him desperate for a moment.

With one bound he had cleared the space that separated him from Margaret, gained her side, and had clasped her in his arms, covering her face with kisses and tears.

In an instant the greatest confusion prevailed. Mrs. Denham was shrieking, and Margaret was struggling, panting with terror, out of his arms.

"Oh, you wretch!" gasped Mrs. Denham. "If there was but a policeman about; but they are never at hand when they're wanted."

"I—I—beg—your pardon," said the count, humbly, drawing back abashed, and letting his arms fall heavily to his side. "Do not censure me too harshly; I could not help it."

Mrs. Denham's rage knew no bounds. She had thrust the frightened girl back and stepped between them.

"Could not help it, indeed!" she cried, quivering with wrath. "We shall see about all that;" and here she called shrilly to an officer who had just made his appearance around the corner of the path.

But before the man had time to reach them and listen to Mrs. Denham's complaint, Margaret's trembling white fingers were clutching eargerly at her arm.

"Oh, spare him!" she sobbed piteously—"do not have him arrested. I am sure he mistook me for another—some one he knew and loved."

"Do you mean to say that you wish this man who has offered you so dastardly an insult to escape all punishment for this heinous offense?"

"If you please," murmured Margaret, desperately.

"It is because she wishes no scandal," was the thought that passed through Mrs. Denham's mind; and on the whole, she did not know but what it would be best to do as she so earnestly desired—let the matter drop; and yet her chagrin was great at the thought of letting this villain go free. She turned on him a look of withering contempt.

"If the young lady were a daughter of mine," she said, "I should force her to prosecute this affair to the fullest extent of the law. As the matter now stands, I am powerless to mete out to you the punishment you so richly deserve."

By this time the policeman had come up to them. Mrs. Denham was the personification of diplomacy. She asked the guardian of the peace the location of an adjacent avenue. He pointed the way and passed on, little imagining that one of the grandest *exposes* New York

might have ever known had been averted by a woman's tact.

"I thank you," said the count, turning to Margaret with much feeling. "Words fail to express how deeply. You are so like one whom I loved—and lost—that my feelings carried me away. Sweet girl, do not consider what I have done I meant for an insult in any manner whatsoever. If your life was in peril at this moment, and I could save you at the risk of my own, I would do it."

Were his words prophetic? The sentence had barely left his lips when, directly behind where they were standing, they heard a terrible shout, and turning suddenly around, they beheld a sight that froze the blood in their veins—a horse, riderless, dashing toward them with lightning-like speed.

CHAPTER XLIX.

"GOD HELP ME—I CANNOT TRUST YOU."

Too quick for a prayer—too quick for a thought the maddened animal had cleared the space that intervened, and was rearing above Margaret's head; another instant, and those iron hoofs would be planted upon that blue-veined, upturned, horrified face.

The count saw and realized, and with a mighty cry sprung forward between Margaret and the infuriated beast, flinging the girl with all his strength to one side; but a burst of horror broke from the white lips of the spectators of that awful scene—for they saw that the fate from which he had saved the young girl, had overtaken himself; the iron hoofs struck him, and he fell to the earth like a log; and the horse dashed on.

The whole affair had happened in almost an instant of time; but Mrs. Denham alone seemed to have retained her senses, and was capable of action.

She saw that Margaret had swooned, and seeing the stranger lying there, with the green grass dyed with the blood which oozed from a gaping wound on his temple, her first thought was that he was dead. In a trice she was kneeling beside him; but on placing her hand over his heart, she found that it still beat faintly.

It was hours after that when Margaret Lancaster opened her eyes.

She found herself in her own room at Mrs. Denham's with both that lady and Gerald bending anxiously over her.

With consciousness, memory returned—they knew that by the gasp of terror that Margaret gave.

“Where is he—the—stranger—I mean; was he hurt?” she cried, excitedly.

“Yes,” returned Mrs. Denham, gravely: “lie back on the pillow, and I will tell you all about it.”

Too weak for remonstrance, Margaret obeyed.

“He was badly hurt, my dear,” continued Mrs. Denham, “but the doctor who is in attendance upon him has hopes of his recovery; and owing to the fact that he saved your precious life, Margaret dear—I felt that the—the unpleasant episode in which he was first brought to our notice should be entirely obliterated, so I had him brought here.”

“I must see him and thank him,” sobbed Margaret, starting up. “Poor gentleman! I thank God he is not dead.”

Great was Margaret's emotion as she knelt down by the couch on which the stranger lay.

“He saved my life, Gerald, at the risk of his own,” she whispered, turning to her lover; “how grateful I must always be to him.”

And she bent her fair, beautiful head, and reverentially kissed the stranger's hand, which lay on the coverlet.

An hour or more Margaret kept her weary vigil by the stranger's bedside, and she could not account for the keen comfort it gave her to sit there and watch him, holding his hand clasped in both of hers.

He had fallen into a deep sleep when she had taken her place beside him, and now suddenly his eyes opened again, but there was no light of reason in them as they wandered about the room.

At length they rested upon her, and a smile that was like a glory broke over his face.

“Margaret—precious,” he whispered, fearfully, “is it indeed you, come back from the grave to me?”

Margaret was startled at the mention of her name, but

she accounted for it by thinking he had heard Mrs. Denham call her by name, and now it ran in his thoughts. Perchance *her* name might be Margaret, too, this woman of whom he was murmuring.

“Margaret,” he went on pleadingly, “it seems but yesterday that we wandered through the hop fields hand-in-hand. We were all in all to each other then, love. I would give my life to live those days again, and, oh, sweet, a thousand lives, if I had them to give, to atone for the wrong I did you. But you loved me through it all. Oh, Margaret, tender and true, I meant that the little child you left me should inherit all, dear, but she died. I tried to find her grave but I could not. Oh, Margaret, love, I never found life quite the same without you; it was all a dreary blank. Ah, me, if we could but live the brightest part of our lives over again, how we would improve the golden hours, my Margaret.

“Margaret,” he moaned, “why are you so cold to me? Would all the love I could lavish upon you atone for that great wrong? You do not answer, darling, and your silence tells me the past is past.”

Suddenly he held out his arms to her.

“Margaret,” he said, “let me fold you close to my heart for one little minute, as I used to do in the old sweet days; lay your soft cheek against mine, and let me kiss your sweet true lips.”

Margaret bent over him; her heart was too full for utterance, and gently his arms closed about her, and his lips reverentially touched hers.

At that moment, so fatal to the after happiness of two lives, the door opened softly, and the next instant the one word—“Margaret!” rang like a trumpet through the room, and tearing herself free from the encircling arms that clasped her so closely, Margaret turned swiftly, and beheld Gerald Romaine, with a face white and stern as death, standing on the threshold.

“If an angel from Heaven had cried out trumpet-tongued that you were false to me, Margaret, I should not have believed it,” he cried, fiercely; “but what my eyes have witnessed I must believe,” he added, advancing a step into the room. “No, don’t come near me; don’t touch me, Margaret! Sit down; we will talk this matter over as calmly as we can.”

“Gerald,” she sobbed, coming to him and standing before him, with hands clutched tightly together, “do not talk to me so; you—you are breaking my heart! You must not think—you must not believe——”

A hard, bitter laugh, that froze the blood in the girl’s veins, broke from his lips and arrested the sentence on hers.

“Do you mean to say that you did not permit this stranger to kiss the lips of my promised bride? Dare you deny it, when I saw it myself?”

She looked up at him with bewildered eyes.

“How can I deny it when you—you saw it, Gerald?” she muttered, in a low, distressed voice. “But I—oh, Gerald, believe me, love!—I meant no harm.”

He laughed the bitterest laugh that ever was heard.

“In the fairest of jewels why must there be flaws?” he asked, harshly—“in the most perfect fruit, the black speck that marks decay at the root? and in the women, whom men believe angels, deception at their heart’s core? Is no woman true? Great God! the thought is horrible! Tell me the truth, Margaret,” he went on, hoarsely—“has your heart gone out to this man? It is better to know before than *after* marriage. I want the plain truth—it is due me—I must have it!”

“My heart is warm with gratitude toward him, for I owe my life to him, Gerald,” she moaned; “you know that is only right; but I *love* YOU, Gerald, with a different love. If we were to part I—I should pray God in heaven to let the moment in which you turned from me be my last! Trust me and believe me, dear! Oh, you must—you must!”

“Margaret,” returned Gerald Romaine, gravely, “my faith in you has been terribly shaken. God help me! I cannot trust you!”

CHAPTER L.

NO ONE SHOULD LOOK UPON HER FACE AGAIN.

GERALD saw a great shiver pass over Margaret. The cruel words had struck her as lightning strikes a fair flower.

She swayed to and fro as a leaf sways in the wind, and

if he had not put his arm out quickly and caught her, she would have fallen to the floor.

She did not turn and cling to him with tears and sobs; she lay in his arms like a marble statue, her face turned toward his shoulder.

“Have I hurt you by my words, Margaret!” he cried, in alarm.

“You have killed me, Gerald, that is all,” she said, struggling with the sobs to keep them back.

With firm hands she freed herself from his grasp, and stood looking at him with a look that haunted him for many a long, dark year afterward.

“I shall never be the wife of a man who has not unbounded confidence in me. You asked me once in the past to release you from your vows, and I did so. I now ask the same request of you, and you must grant it.”

“Do you mean that you want this engagement of ours broken?” he asked, catching his breath hard.

“I do,” she answered firmly.

“Then if you could lose me as easily as this—see me pass out of your life without making one effort to keep me, then your love was indeed much shallower than I could have believed.”

“We will not speak further of the depths of my love for you,” she answered slowly. “I have given you too much proof of it already.”

“You have brought this matter to this climax purposely, Margaret,” cried Gerald, his face white and set.

She turned away from him, and he rose abruptly.

“Good-bye, Margaret,” he said. “I leave you now and forever; but I foresee that you will not die in the hour that we part, as you declared a moment since that you should do; you will nurse the handsome stranger back to health, marry him, ‘and be happy ever after,’ as the story-books say. Well, as I cannot prevent it, I must endure it.”

“Good-bye, Gerald,” she said gravely, steadily.

He picked up his hat and walked slowly to the door, expecting every moment that she would call him back; but she did not, and the door opened slowly, and closed again after his retreating form.

A few moments later, Mrs. Denham, entering the sick-

room, found Margaret lying in a dead swoon upon the floor.

Thomas, one of the stalwart servants, was quickly summoned, and Margaret was carried at once to her own room.

But she was so long in regaining consciousness that Mrs. Denham was frightened, and sent for Gerald in post-haste, which, much to her surprise, he was slow in answering—he was usually so prompt where Margaret was concerned.

When at length he arrived at the house, and heard from Mrs. Denham how apparently ill Margaret was, he blamed himself greatly, believing that it was his abruptness in leaving her that had caused this.

“We have now two patients in the house instead of one,” said Mrs. Denham, thoughtfully. “The stranger is better,” she went on; “he is rational enough now. Had you not better see him, Mr. Romaine, and learn from him his friends’ addresses, if he has any?”

Very mechanically Gerald complied, thinking to himself that the stranger should be removed from beneath that roof as soon as he was able to be taken away.

He found the man rational as Mrs. Denham had said, but so remarkably weak that he could not speak above a whisper.

“Will you tell me what is the matter with me, where I am, and why I am here?” the stranger asked in a bewildered tone of voice, raising his eyes to the young man bending over him.

“Have you any friends you would like to send for?” asked Gerald, favorably impressed with the man, although he had sworn to himself that he should hate him until the day he died.

“Yes,” replied the stranger. “I have a daughter—but for her I should have been all alone in the world now, with no one to care whether I lived or died.”

“You would like your daughter sent for?” returned Gerald.

“If you will be so kind,” returned the other.

Gerald took his memorandum from his breast-pocket, and waited courteously.

“The address is No. — Lexington Avenue, city,” he murmured, weakly.

“But the name,” said Gerald. “You have forgotten to give me the most important part of the address.”

“The name,” replied the stranger in a low voice, “is *Miss Aurelia Lancaster*.”

A thunderbolt from a clear sky—a volcano bursting beneath his feet—could not have shocked and startled Gerald Romaine more.

“Am I mad—or—dreaming!” he cried, excitedly. “Did I understand you to name Aurelia Lancaster?”

“Yes,” replied the count, whom we may as well call by his correct name—Paul Lancaster—now, “you heard aright. She—is—my—daughter. Send for her.”

“Then Margaret is your daughter too,” cried Gerald, joyfully. “Great God! what a weight is now lifted from my mind.”

Paul Lancaster looked at him in bewildered amazement.

“I—I had a little daughter named Margaret—but she died in her infancy when I—I—was not with the children, so her sister Aurelia told me. The—the young lady whom I saw in the park looked so much like the dear young wife I had lost in youth, that it seemed to me, for the first time in my life, my feelings carried me away beyond my own control, and I—I kissed her. I did not mean any harm, Heaven knows.”

How Aurelia had found her father, Gerald could form no idea—but he was astounded beyond all words to hear that she had told him that Margaret—her sister—was dead.

There was something back of it that he could not fathom.

All these thoughts passed through Gerald’s mind with lightning-like rapidity, but he drew up a chair, and, sinking into it, asked, without betraying his intense excitement:

“Did you ever hear your daughter Aurelia speak of the Romaines? They were the people who brought her up from infancy. They were farmers down in Virginia.”

“Yes, yes,” said Paul Lancaster, huskily. “My wife died under their—roof—and—my little child Margaret. Who are you, young man, that you ask me these personal questions?”

"I am Gerald Romaine—the farmer's son," was the quiet answer.

"God bless you and yours," returned Paul Lancaster, with great emotion. "I intended to search for you, and make it all up to you, I——"

He sunk back exhausted on the pillow, too weak to finish the sentence, and Gerald dared not tell him, in his weak state, the great news he had in store for him.

But Margaret—he could tell her—but then all the story of Aurelia's perfidy, which he had kept so carefully guarded from her, would come out.

Hastily quitting the sick-room he went to the library, and sent one of the servants to Margaret's room, begging her to come down to see him, as he had something particular to say to her.

A few moments later Mrs. Denham entered the room looking very pale, and walked up to him, laying a trembling hand on his arm.

"Mr. Romaine, can you bear a great shock?" she said, gently.

"Yes," he answered, hoarsely; "but don't keep me in suspense."

"Margaret—has gone," she said, slowly; "she left a note for me saying she was going where no one whom she had ever known should look upon her face again."

CHAPTER LI.

DRIVEN TO BAY.

WHEN Margaret left Mrs. Denham's house, her head was in such a whirl that she paid little heed whither her footsteps turned.

Finding herself opposite a *cafe*, and feeling greatly in need of refreshments, Margaret entered it and sunk into the nearest chair.

Margaret drank only the tea, pushing back the food untasted after he had brought it. Suddenly she was startled by the sound of a sharp, stifled cry, proceeding from a small table directly opposite her.

A young girl had risen from her chair and was hurrying toward the door.

One glance at that face—that was like no other face, and Margaret sprung to her feet, calling loudly:

“Aurelia! Aurelia!”

But the girl only hurried the faster to reach the door.

In that moment Margaret paid no heed to aught else save that she had found Aurelia, and, in the midst of the fashionable crush there was every possibility of losing her, for Aurelia had evidently not heard her voice.

Throwing to the cashier at the desk a bill, with the check, and telling him she did not have time to wait for the change, Margaret hurried with desperate haste after the swiftly retreating figure.

She saw her enter a carriage; it was the same grand equipage with the coal-black horses she had seen once before.

Frantically Margaret signaled the nearest cab.

“Do you see that carriage turning around the corner?” she cried, excitedly.

The man nodded.

“Follow and overtake it,” she said, “and I will give you double your fare.”

The next instant the cab was whirling at a break-neck speed in the direction the coach had taken, and as the cabman turned the first corner, he saw the vehicle just ahead of him.

At length the cab came to a sudden halt.

“It is stopping at the corner house, miss,” said the man, “and don’t you see, a young lady has alighted and has gone up the stone steps.”

Margaret looked.

Yes, Aurelia had alighted, and was just ringing the bell, but the greatest surprise of all to Margaret was, she saw that it was Mrs. Denham’s house which her sister had entered.

Hastily alighting from the cab, Margaret paid the driver and dismissed him, and, all unmindful of the note she had written and left behind her for Mrs. Denham, hurried up the broad marble steps after Aurelia.

Margaret glided into the house and down the corridor, where she heard the sound of voices. They were from the direction of the conservatory, and thither Margaret bent her steps. The door was ajar, and noiselessly she entered.

The sight that greeted her eyes, as she parted the pink

blossoms and looked at them, remained before her until the day she died.

Gerald was sitting in one of the rustic chairs near the fountain, his face hidden in one hand; Aurelia, half kneeling at his feet, had grasped the other hand, and held it tightly.

“You tell me to rise, Gerald, my love,” she said, in her musical voice—“you tell me that no woman ought to kneel. I shall kneel to you, for my prayer is to you, and you must hear me, dearest.”

“It is madness, Aurelia,” said Gerald, distressedly; “you will not give me time to explain. I sent for you, not on my own account, but on your father’s, as I told you in my note, which explained to you that I know *all*. The past is *past* between us; other ties have been formed. I am now, as I was once before, in that past which it pains me to recall—the betrothed husband of Margaret.”

The beauty pushed her dark curls back from her face and looked at him, with a low, passionate cry.

“The betrothed husband of Margaret—weak, docile Margaret, as you once used to call her! I cannot, I will not believe that you have been so foolish as to renew those old ties with her, dearest; but, even were it so, they can be as easily broken now as then! What does a weak, insipid creature like Margaret know of love! Nothing, I tell you! Oh, Gerald, do not let her come between you and me and our love!”

“Aurelia,” he said, with much agitation, “listen to me.”

“You loved me once, Gerald, better than life, and such a love cannot die out of your heart so soon, as you would have me believe. You betrothed yourself to Margaret through pique; but now that she has gone away from you voluntarily, do not seek to find her—let her go where she will. You and I will not grieve if we *never* see her face again. We shall have love and each other.”

The very heartlessness of the remark struck Gerald. How could Aurelia, whom Margaret loved so well, speak so sneeringly, so harshly of her? he thought to himself in wonder; and she Margaret’s own sister.

Perhaps she read the thought in his face, for she went on eagerly:

“Margaret Lancaster has not as much of a claim on me as you imagine, Gerald—Margaret is but my half-sister, the daughter of a pretty peasant girl whom my father wedded and—and—deserted soon after the child was born. I heard the whole story from papa’s lips.”

Then followed an accurate account from Aurelia of how she had met her father, and where; and she also rehearsed to Gerald the story of the money the old doctor had willed, and, as before, she substituted her own name instead of Margaret’s.

It actually staggered Gerald to hear how innocently she could tell that glaring falsehood.

“It is a wonder you and your father, both being so rich, did not attempt to find Margaret,” said Gerald, calmly, looking straight into her face.

For the first time in her life Aurelia’s cool, daring courage forsook her. She saw in an instant that she was driven at bay.

CHAPTER LII.

“KEEP HER AND MARGARET THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD APART.”

WHAT pen could portray the feelings of Margaret Lancaster as she listened, with breathless attention, to the wonderful revelation that fell from Aurelia’s lips, and it dawned upon her dazed senses that the stranger who had been so irresistibly attracted to her at the park entrance, and to whom her heart had gone out so strangely, was HER OWN FATHER.

And she heard Gerald tell Aurelia how, on awakening to consciousness a few hours later, he had called upon the strangers about him to send for his daughter, Aurelia, naming where they would find her, and Gerald had sent for her at once.

“But why,” thought Margaret, “did my father not make some effort to find me, too, even though Aurelia, who seems to think so little of me, did not?”

And the thought had hardly shaped itself in her mind ere Gerald asked of Aurelia the same question, and,

looking through the oleander branches, she saw Aurelia turn as pale as death.

How little Margaret imagined what the answering of that question would mean for the treacherous girl!

But Margaret's thoughts were in too much of a whirl to pay much heed to this.

With fleet footsteps she turned, and would have fled from the conservatory to her father's side had not the hand of a strange fate held her back. At the first step the darkness of death seemed to enfold her; she threw out her hands with a little cry, and fell, face downward, among the roses in a deep swoon.

Both Gerald and Aurelia, hearing the crash of the breaking vines and falling body, sprung forward.

"It is—Margaret!" cried Aurelia, excitedly, and in a voice that sounded like nothing human, she gasped out, hoarsely:

"Do you think she heard all?"

"I have every reason to believe so," said Gerald, raising the inanimate figure in his strong arms and laying her down on the rustic bench near the fountain, from which he laved her face with cold water with his handkerchief to revive her, and too thankful in finding her to think of much else.

Aurelia stood beside him, looking down at the death-white face; but no wave of tender feeling stirred her hard heart.

"You said Margaret had fled from you, Gerald," she whispered, hoarsely. "Are you glad that she has come back, or—are—you—sorry?"

For answer he bent his fair, handsome head and passionately kissed Margaret's pale lips.

"If I had lost her," he murmured, brokenly, "life would have been nothing to me. I would have searched the world over to find her; and, having found her, pleaded with her, on my knees, not to break the sweet bond of love between us. My prayer to her would be to marry me, and give me the opportunity of devoting my life to making her happy."

"You really love Margaret, then?" cried Aurelia, bitterly.

"Yes, and I have loved my pure, gentle Margaret all my life," he answered, calmly.

She came close to him, and her face was marvelously beautiful in its penitential sweetness.

“Gerald, can you ever forgive me for the suffering I caused you in the past?” she sobbed. “Let me tell you how I have regretted it. Oh, surely the blind, silly girl, who, ignorant of the value of the treasure, slighted and spurned it, may indeed be pardoned when, realizing her folly, and sensible at last of the nobility of a nature she once failed to appreciate, she comes and says, what it is so hard for a woman to say, ‘Take me back to your heart, gather me up in your arms, as in the olden days, because—because I love you now, because only your love can make me happy.’ Oh, Gerald, believe me when I tell you at last—at last—your own Aurelia loves you, as she never loved any one before. Remember, I was foolish, vain and thoughtless in those other days, Gerald. Pity me! love me! take me back to your heart! God is my witness that I do love you entirely now! Dearest, say I will love you and trust you as in the days of old.”

She tried to put her arms up around his neck, and to rest her head on his shoulder, but he resisted, and put her at arm’s length from him.

Holding her there, he looked at her with cold scorn in his eyes, and a heavy shadow darkening the brow that five minutes before had been so calm.

“Aurelia, how dare you attempt to deceive me, after all that has passed between us? I know you and your object but too well.”

“You do not believe that I really love you, Gerald?” she sobbed. “Oh, do not look at me so harshly! I am not deceiving you! Stop bathing Margaret’s face and listen to me! Oh, listen! I am not deceiving you, I *do* love you! If you could see my poor heart you would not look so cruelly cold. You ought to know that I am terribly in earnest when I can stoop to beg for the ruins of a heart, which, in its freshness I threw away and trampled upon.”

He had seen Aurelia weep and act dramatically before when it suited her purpose, and he only smiled as he answered:

“Yes, Aurelia, you ruined it, as you thought, by trampling upon it, but I have rebuilt it. Let me tell you the

truth; when you overturned the temple, you crumbled your own image that was set up there; and I, long ago, swept out and gave to the hungry winds the dust of the broken idol, and over my heart you can reign no more. My love and faith were strangled by the velvet hand I had kissed in my doting fondness. Never until then did I realize the nobility—the grandeur of Margaret's nature as when compared with yours, and all the old love and reverence sprung up once more in my heart for her, and I say to you, Aurelia, that I love Margaret with a purer, sweeter, deeper and truer love than I have ever known before."

Aurelia cast herself down on one of the seats, and rocked herself to and fro with a despairing wail.

"I have indeed lost you—forever," she moaned. "Once you hung over me adoringly, wearying me with your caresses. Now you draw back from my touch as if I were a viper. And I—what is there I would not give for one—just one—of the kisses that in that past I put up my hand to ward off. Oh, fool that I was!"

"Aurelia," said Gerald, deeply pained, "for your own sake I pray you to say no more."

"I wish," cried Aurelia, springing up from her chair with the fury of a panting tigress, "that Margaret had died when she was a child. She has come between me and everything I hold dear in this world. I—I could curse her for it; I do curse her for it, and will to the latest day of my life. I am going where none of you will ever see my face again. There is one thing that I shall always hope for and look for, and that is that you will tire of Margaret's weak, puny love, as you did once before—and that you will turn to me."

"You must not go away," said Gerald, calmly, ignoring the last part of her remarks; "you forget that your father lies under this roof, ill unto death, and has sent for you to come to him. Your place is by his side, to soothe and comfort him. Margaret and I will always love you as a dear sister——"

The bitterest laugh that ever was heard rang mockingly through the conservatory.

"A sister!" she cut in sharply; "no, I must have a husband's love from you—or nothing. As for my father—Margaret, who loves the *role* of a meek, pious, com-

forting saint, can console him better than I could. He makes no secret of having loved Margaret best. He will give Margaret the grand old estate of the Lancasters, and I will never forgive him for it—for *I*, instead of that low-born peasant's daughter, should queen it over that magnificent domain. I wish you all the happiness you can find with insipid Margaret," she cried, uttering another blood-curdling, mocking laugh; and with that, before Gerald could put out his hand to stop her, Aurelia was gone—she had vanished like a shadow.

Gathering Margaret in his arms Gerald hastily bore her to the drawing-room, and summoned Mrs. Denham, who was overjoyed to see upon entering the room, Margaret, safe and sound in her home again, despite the note the girl had written her.

"I need a woman's wit to help me out of this affair," he thought, watching her as she bent over Margaret. "I must tell her the whole story, and be guided by her counsel."

And Gerald did tell her all, from beginning to end, even to the most minute detail.

Mrs. Denham listened with the greatest astonishment.

"The stranger—beneath—this roof Margaret's father!" she reiterated, over and over again. "Why, Mr. Romaine, the whole thing sounds like a romance; but this half-sister of Margaret—this Aurelia—why, I have never, in the whole course of my life, heard of such a heartless creature. My advice to you, Mr. Romaine, is, as long as she hates Margaret so bitterly, do not try to find her, let her go. You are very rich, so is Margaret, now, so you can maintain this Aurelia handsomely, because she will be your wife's half-sister; but let me warn you, as you value Margaret's safety, keep her and this sister the whole wide world apart."

CHAPTER LIII.

CONCLUSION.

It was some weeks before Paul Lancaster was strong enough to bear the shock of the wonderful news in store for him.

It was Mrs. Denham who told it to him at last, and, oh, what a joyful meeting there was between father and

daughter! But one cloud darkened the sunlight of their horizon, and that was, the whereabouts of Aurelia.

Despite all that she had done, sweet Margaret bore no ill will toward Aurelia. On the contrary, with tears in her gentle blue eyes, she had besought Gerald to do all in his power to find her half-sister that she might divide equally with her the great wealth that had come so unexpectedly to her.

And Margaret was firm in refusing to touch a penny of it until Aurelia's share was set aside for her. But, although carefully worded advertisements relative to this fact were kept constantly in the papers, Aurelia did not return.

From the moment she had passed out of the conservatory door she had vanished as completely from sight as though the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed her.

At length Gerald noticed that something more than Aurelia's absence, even, was weighing on Mr. Lancaster's mind.

Both gentlemen had spent a small fortune since the day of her disappearance in endeavoring to trace her, but it was quite useless; and, slowly, from dark-brown, Mr. Lancaster's hair turned snow-white.

"Romaine," he cried, excitedly, one day, as he paced the floor of his room nervously up and down, "I can bear the weight of the terrible secret I hold locked in my breast no longer. I must speak with you about it, for I could never mention it to my daughter Margaret. What I have to say would completely prostrate her, and it is this: No girl in this whole wide world needs constant, watchful care so much as my poor Aurelia. My one constant prayer to Heaven, Romaine, is that she may never love, for she must never marry, because"—and here his strong voice broke down completely, and he bowed his head and wept as only a strong man weeps when grief more bitter to endure than death itself sweeps over him—"because," he repeated, faintly, "the taint of insanity runs in the girl's blood from her mother. I did not know this when I married her mother. Every dark-eyed daughter of that house becomes insane at about the time of their eighteenth year, but in some cases their malady has not shown itself

until they marry, but as sure as fate they never escape then. I have told you before now the story of my unhappy life. One part I kept back which you, by this announcement in regard to my daughter Aurelia, must have readily foreseen. When my young wife Aurelia discovered that I had had a wife before I met her, and that other wife's child must inherit my estate, poor Aurelia lost her reason. It was then that she took the two babes and fled to this country, where I lost track of them completely.

“Now my great fear is, has not the same dread malady overtaken my daughter Aurelia? The torture of it on my mind is killing me. I would give every dollar I am worth to find my child, that I might be able to watch over her when the dread cloud that will darken her young life settles over her. She has her many faults, but, oh, Romaine, should they not find pardon when we think of the future that awaits her! Would to God that she may never marry, that that accursed and much-to-be-pitied race may die out with her! I could not tell Margaret; it would break her heart, and the secret was eating my life away, bearing it alone.”

Gerald renewed his efforts to find Aurelia, but it was all useless.

They did not know Aurelia's fate for many a long day afterward.

Margaret and Gerald were married, Mr. Lancaster giving the sweet, timid young bride away at the altar.

Gerald Romaine never forgot that day. It was the happiest of his whole life.

He remembered how pretty Margaret's hand had trembled on his arm as they walked down the dim aisle of the old church together, and he had whispered lovingly to her:

“My own, my darling wife, at last, thank God!”

And when they were alone in the carriage together—alone for the first time since the beautiful, holy words were uttered that made her his very own for life—he flung his arms about her, drew her fondly toward him, whispering:

“Nestle your dear little head on my shoulder, my sweet Margaret. And, oh, why won't you say what you

know so well I am hungering to hear? Why won't you say, 'Gerald, my husband, I love you!'"

The glowing face was only pressed closer to his shoulder.

"My little darling!"

"Oh, Gerald—you—you know that I *do* love you!" she faltered, shyly.

"But you did not add the two words that I most long to hear, darling!" he said, in the old pleading voice.

"You know what they are perfectly well, precious."

"I—I—*do* love you, my dear husband!" murmured shy Margaret.

He put his hand under her chin, lifted her blushing face, and kissed her sweet lips repeatedly.

Then, as his splendid eyes met hers, he read in her beautiful pure face all her love and confidence and happy hope.

Gerald drew her closer to his bosom, and laid his cheek against hers, saying fondly and proudly:

" 'My wife—my life! Oh, we will walk this world,
Yoked in all exercise of noble end,
And so through these dark gates across the wild
That no man knows. My hopes and thine are one.
Accomplish thou my manhood, and thyself.
Lay thy sweet hands in mine, and trust to me.' "

Meanwhile, where was Aurelia, the beautiful, faulty girl who had so much need of the pity of Heaven and mankind?

They tell even now, in the gay city of Paris, of the wondrous beauty of a young girl who came there suddenly one day, no one knew from whence.

She was wondrously lovely. Men lost their hearts by one look at that perfect face, and adored her.

She was gay, willful, capricious, proud, and defiant—yet all that was enchanting.

No man who looked into those wondrous dark eyes could resist her—yet a man had far better given his heart to a marble statue than to her.

She took all—she gave nothing. Even princes sighed in vain for one smile from those beautiful lips.

Those who knew her best could tell that her gayety was all forced—her brilliancy assumed. They called

her the Beautiful Icicle, and no name could have suited her better.

Men knew that her smiles were deadly as poison; a glance from her dark eyes fatal as death—yet they were like moths fluttering around the light—they fluttered nearer and nearer, were singed, and fell under her feet to be trampled on.

She lived in a whirl of excitement—she knew no rest. There was no revel in that world of hers in which she did not take the lead. There was no extravagance in which she did not take the principal part. There was no gayety so wild but that she joined in it, yet always the same—cold, proud, cruel as death.

So through the long, brilliant years she lived, and they said no woman living had such luxury, such admiration as fell to her lot; and they said, too, that no woman living had done more harm by her fatal gift of beauty, which she might have turned into a blessing from Heaven instead of a curse; for wives and sweethearts trembled when they heard her name upon the lips of a husband or a lover.

And that name which struck such terror to the hearts of women was—Aurelia.

But one day she disappeared from Paris quite as suddenly as she had come.

On the pearl and gold table of her boudoir they found a card bearing these few simple words:

“Sell everything that belongs to me at public sale, and divide it as far as it will go among the needy poor.
[Signed] “AURELIA.”

“There was a little heart, after all, in the Beautiful Icicle,” the people said, who obeyed her behest.

One day, months later, Gerald and Margaret, in their sunny, happy home across the water, received a letter bearing a foreign post-mark. Margaret pressed it to her lips with a great, glad cry.

“Call papa, Gerald, dearest,” she said. “See, it is from our long-lost Aurelia; he will want to hear it read.”

And, with her loved ones seated near her, Margaret broke the seal. It was indeed from Aurelia, and ran as follows:

“DEAR MARGARET, GERALD, AND FATHER,—The time has come when I think it best to relieve your minds in regard to my fate—I am married; not to an emperor, grand duke, or a noble lord—my Robin is only an artist—but I am far happier with him than I would be with another man, were he a king on a throne. Ah, yes, we are very happy, Robin and I, in our little cottage down by the banks of the River Rhine. Come and see us, Margaret, you and Gerald, and bring father with you; and tell him this for me, Margaret: I know of the curse that hung over my life. I learned of it from some of his private papers which he entrusted to my care, and tell him, Margaret, that *God in his mercy has spared me from a fate more cruel than death—the curse has passed me by—unharmed—untouched.* I have learned life’s greatest, grandest lesson, Margaret, and that is, that there is something dearer than gold, and far more precious than all worldly wealth, and that is—the true love of a faithful, honest heart. All other touches of love that I have known in the past, were but light fancies, I find, Margaret. I never knew what real love meant until Robin and I were wed. I know you are all very happy. I read in the society papers how fond Gerald is of his lovely wife, and proud father is of his fair-haired Margaret—his treasure, as he calls you. But when you think of me, if ever, always think of me kindly, and at my best, and say to yourself: ‘It was the true love of an honest heart that won—your.—’

“ ‘AURELIA.’ ”

[THE END.]



08. 120

LAURA JEAN LIBBEY'S

GREATEST NOVELS.

87124
L. of C
L. of D
120

These novels are guaranteed to be Laura Jean Libbey's best novels. Look out for them and see that the author's name, Laura Jean Libbey, appears on both cover and title page. The following stories by Laura Jean Libbey have already been published in book-form at 25 cents each. Take this list to the nearest book store and be supplied with the sweetest, tenderest and most charming works of fiction ever written.

THE ALPHABET OF LOVE	25c.
A MASTER WORKMAN'S OATH	25c.
FLIRTATIONS OF A BEAUTY	25c.
WILLFUL GAYNELL	25c.
PRETTY FREDA'S LOVERS	25c.
THE CRIME OF HALLOW-E'EN	25c.
LITTLE LEAFY	25c.
LITTLE RUBY'S RIVAL LOVERS	25c.
ONLY A MECHANIC'S DAUGHTER	25c.
DAISY GORDON'S FOLLY	25c.
LYNDALL'S TEMPTATION	25c.
THE BEAUTIFUL COQUETTE	25c.
DORA MILLER	25c.

These enchanting novels are for sale at all news-stands and book stores throughout the country at 25 cents per copy, or a single copy will be sent to any address on receipt of 25 cents.

Address **MUNRO'S PUBLISHING HOUSE,**

Box 3643.

24 and 26 Vandewater St., New York

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021891587